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**The Moral Resources of Resistance**  
**Alasdair Macintyre For and Against Marxism**

Thomas, Stephen

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***The Moral Resources of  
Resistance:  
Alasdair MacIntyre for and  
against Marxism***

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**Doctoral Dissertation: European Studies Department**

**King's College London**

## Abstract

*This thesis is a critical examination of two different stages in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In particular it deals with his account of the moral resources available to radical thought in contemporary society.*

*MacIntyre's work presents us with two different accounts of what these moral resources might be and how they might affect the way that we conceive of radical politics. In his earlier Marxist work, MacIntyre claimed, firstly, that an intelligible morality needs to be understood as the satisfaction of desire, secondly that we could come to learn that what we really desired could be achieved through the forms of social solidarity developed in working class life and, thirdly, that we should understand Marxism as providing us with a subtle and non-reductive account of the relationship between human agency and the social structures of the economic base (chapter 1). By contrast, in his later work, most notably in *After Virtue* and the works that would follow it, MacIntyre rejects Marxism and instead seeks to develop an account of practical rationality based on 'practices' that are developed from within the confines of a tradition understood as a self-contained and linguistically based conceptual scheme.*

*What I attempt to do in the following dissertation is to defend a form of Marxism based on MacIntyre's earlier insights. I will argue that, whatever his claims to the contrary, and whatever its continuing interest as a critique of non-cognitivism, his later work represents a step backward from the sophisticated understanding of base and superstructure sketched in his earlier work (chapter 2). I argue that the pessimism that arises from MacIntyre's later work starts out from an account of the negative effects of proletarianisation that is highly questionable and which undermines wide scale resistance (chapter 3). I also argue that it relies on an account of the self-contained nature of conceptual schemes that simply cannot be sustained (chapter 4). In its place I attempt to make a case for a form of Marxist humanism, a position which, I believe, is compatible both with Marx's most important insights about the nature of human beings (chapter 5) and with the existence of a plurality of desirable goods (chapter 6).*

## **Acknowledgement**

I wish to thank my supervisor Professor Alex Callinicos for the many, many hours of guidance and encouragement that he has given me over the past six years. I also wish to thank my family for all their love and support.

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# Introduction

## The project outlined

This thesis is a critical examination of two different stages in the work of Alasdair MacIntyre. In particular it deals with his account of the moral resources available to radical thought in contemporary society. By ‘moral’ I mean to include both questions of what it is right to do and what it is right to be<sup>1</sup> and hence how both these things can act as the motivation and justification for social criticism and radical change. I am not, therefore, intending to focus on the moral as some kind of ‘subsystem’ of the ethical that deals exclusively with our obligations to others<sup>2</sup>. Indeed, it is worth saying now that I will not be observing any kind of significant distinction between the terms ‘moral’ and ‘ethical’ in the following discussion. My concern is rather with how far we can justify the broader claims of humanism and the possibilities it offers for a normative critique of social conditions as violating or denying human needs, and the extent to which it is possible to view historical development as arising from forms of human thought and action to which the categories of ‘consciousness’, ‘agency’, ‘choice’, ‘responsibility’, ‘moral value’ etc. are indispensable<sup>3</sup>.

MacIntyre’s work presents us with two different accounts of what these moral resources might be and how they might affect the way that we conceive of radical politics. As we will see in chapter one, the younger Marxist MacIntyre argued both that an intelligible morality involved the satisfaction of desire and that people could come to learn through class struggle that ‘certain ways of sharing human life are

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<sup>1</sup> See Ruth Abbey *Charles Taylor* (Teddington, Accumen 2000) p11

<sup>2</sup> I will not therefore be following Bernard Williams’ usage. See Bernard Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, Fontana 1993) p8 and more generally chapter 10.

<sup>3</sup> Here I am summarising Kate Soper’s account of humanism in Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London, Hutchinson and Co. 1986) pp11-12. I return to this definition in section 5.1 below.



indeed what they most desire'<sup>4</sup>. He is therefore committed to the view that capitalist society not only creates its own gravediggers in the working class, but also equips them with the ethical perspective that is sufficient for the needs of the *revolutionary* overthrow of the capitalist order and the creation of a socialist society.

However when we turn to the major works for which he is now most well known, works such as *After Virtue*<sup>5</sup>, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*<sup>6</sup> and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*<sup>7</sup>, we can see that MacIntyre had come to reject his previous attempt to link morality and desire and to suggest instead that an account of practical rationality that runs counter to narrow possessive individualism could be found in an account of what he terms 'practices', practices that are developed from within the confines of a tradition understood as a self-contained and linguistically based conceptual scheme. Since capitalist modernity is most certainly not marked by the dominance of such traditions, this has the effect of making his account of moral resources dependent of forms of life that, by his own admission, are sufficiently marginalised as to only provide the basis for a limited form of *resistance* undertaken in the hope of outliving the existing order but not of overthrowing it. If it is also true, as we will see in chapter 4, that there are occasions in his later post-Marxist works such as *Dependent Rational Animals*<sup>8</sup> that suggest other possibilities, we will also see that such richer possibilities remain untheorised.

This thesis is therefore centred around an examination of MacIntyre's work as a radical anti-capitalist social critic. I believe that an understanding of the sources of resistance and potential revolution is important, and, I will attempt to argue that the best approach to both of these things is to begin with MacIntyre's earlier Marxist work.

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<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008) p65

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985)

<sup>6</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, Duckworth 1988)

<sup>7</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London, Duckworth 1990)

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999)

I will argue that the later work is too pessimistic in its attempt to rule out the possibility of revolutionary transformation and that it also a poor basis from which to theorise the potential for broader forms of resistance to power.

However, before we turn to these issues, it is worth remembering that the significance of the radical anti-capitalist dimension in all stages of MacIntyre's thought was obscured in contemporary reaction to *After Virtue* and its sequels by a narrow focus on its significance for the liberal / communitarian debate, a discussion that also took place either in ignorance or neglect of his earlier Marxist writings<sup>9</sup>. This is a situation that has now changed and the continuity of anti-capitalist themes in MacIntyre's work is now much harder to ignore. This change of emphasis was prefigured by Peter McMylor's 1994 study, *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity*<sup>10</sup>, but is most importantly developed in Kelvin Knight's interpretation of MacIntyre's later works as constituting a form of 'revolutionary Aristotelianism'<sup>11</sup> and Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson's collection of MacIntyre's earlier Marxist writings and their other discussions of his work<sup>12</sup>. The increasing interest in the radical implications of MacIntyre's work can also be gauged if we compare the most recent collection of critical essays, *Virtue and Politics* (2011),<sup>13</sup> with the relative neglect of these concerns in earlier collections of scholarly engagement with his work, such as the 2003

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<sup>9</sup> See, for example, chapter 2 'MacIntyre: morality after virtue' in Stephen Mulhall and Adam Swift *Liberals and Communitarians* (Oxford, Blackwell 1996)

<sup>10</sup> Peter McMylor *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity* (London, Routledge 1994)

<sup>11</sup> Kelvin Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in *Contemporary Political Studies 1996 Volume 2* edited by Iain Hampshire-Monk and Jeffrey Stanyer (The Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom 1996), it is an approach that is reflected in Knight's selection of texts and editor's introduction in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998) and is further developed in Kelvin Knight *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge, Polity 2007).

<sup>12</sup> *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Essays and Articles, 1953–1974* edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008). See also, for example, Paul Blackledge 'Freedom, Desire and Revolution: Alasdair MacIntyre's Early Marxist Ethics' in *History of Political Thought* Vol. XXVI, No. 4. (2005) and Paul Blackledge *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire and Revolution* (Albany, State University of New York Press 2012)

<sup>13</sup> *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011)

contemporary philosophy in focus collection *Alasdair MacIntyre*,<sup>14</sup> or the liberal / communitarian focus of John Horton and Susan Mendus' 1994 collection, *After MacIntyre*<sup>15</sup>.

If we do turn our attention to MacIntyre, as both a major moral philosopher and a radical opponent of the capitalist social order, this allows us to focus on some interesting questions about the political role of 'morality'. Morality and moral philosophy has not always had a great reputation on left, especially amongst Marxists. Thus in no less a place than *The Communist Manifesto* we find Marx and Engels declaring that the proletariat sees morality, along with law and religion, as 'so many bourgeois prejudices, behind which lurk in ambush just as many bourgeois interests'<sup>16</sup>. This has lead to the popular interpretation of Marxism, as summarised by Steven Lukes, as opposed to all moralising, rejecting, as out of date, all moral vocabulary and holding to a critique of both capitalism and political economy that 'is not moral but scientific'<sup>17</sup>. However if socialism is to fulfil Marx and Engels's wish and come about from the 'self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority'<sup>18</sup>, then moral ideas cannot be so swiftly dismissed given the fundamental connection that they have with conscious human agency – or so I shall argue. Marxism is the most developed body of radical social theory that we possess and its relationship to morality must go beyond the dismissal suggested by some of Marx's writings, an attitude which can also be present in the work of other later Marxists<sup>19</sup>. I will attempt to show in what follows that MacIntyre's earlier work is a crucial contribution to helping us to get this relationship straight and that his later work, for all its interest and insight, should not persuade us that this is not possible.

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<sup>14</sup> *Alasdair MacIntyre* edited by Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003)

<sup>15</sup> *After MacIntyre* edited by John Horton and Susan Mendus (Cambridge, Polity Press 1994)

<sup>16</sup> Karl Marx *The Communist Manifesto* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p230

<sup>17</sup> Steven Lukes *Marxism and Morality* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1985) p3

<sup>18</sup> Marx *The Communist Manifesto* (op cit) p230

<sup>19</sup> In chapter 5 my focus will be on Louis Althusser as representing a theoretically sophisticated exposition of this position.

However, if there has been a revival of interest in MacIntyre as a radical social critic what more needs to be said? Or, quite specifically, how will my aims in the work that follow differ from the existing contributions and perspectives of the authors who I have just cited? The themes common to McMylor, Knight, Blackledge and Davidson and the following dissertation is to stress the radical form of critique present in MacIntyre's work and the distance between it and conservatism, the main, though still important, contribution of McMylor's 1994 book. Knight situates his work as a defence of the radical possibilities of MacIntyre's work from *After Virtue* onwards as a form of 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' whose account of the nature of 'practices' can contribute to the 'legitimation and coordination' allowing previously isolated struggles to be transformed into 'a new class war of attrition'<sup>20</sup>. As we will see in the middle chapters of this dissertation, this is not a position that I accept, although I will concede that MacIntyre's account of practices is an important contribution to a critique of capitalist society.

If what follows can be clearly distinguished from Knight's work, what can be said of the writings of Blackledge and Davidson? Here we find a more straightforward agreement between my work, a shared commitment to drawing on and developing the insights of MacIntyre's earlier Marxist work. Indeed, more than an agreement there is also a fairly obvious debt since, as will become clear in chapter one, my understanding of the nature of MacIntyre's earlier project obviously draws upon Blackledge and Davidson's recovery of MacIntyre's Marxist perspective<sup>21</sup>. However, although I may begin chapter one in part standing on the shoulders of others, my main concerns in what follows develops the engagement with MacIntyre's work into a broader discussion of metaethics and moral philosophy, the nature of conceptual schemes and the most crucially perhaps the possibility of appealing to Marxist notions of flourishing in the light of the acknowledgement of reasonable pluralism. To pursue these themes in this context is to diverge significantly from their work.

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<sup>20</sup> Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' (op cit) p896

<sup>21</sup> Blackledge and Davidson *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (op cit).

The position that this work begins with and to which it finally returns is therefore socialist humanism, even if this is a term that MacIntyre himself does not explicitly use it is clearly where his earlier Marxist works lie. This is a position that seeks to ground radical socialist politics in an understanding of human agency that cannot be reduced to a structural analysis even if it does seek to take account of the manner in which the structures of a given social formation both extend and restrict our freedom. As developed by E. P. Thompson it is a position that seeks to acknowledge the ‘part subject, part object’ nature of human beings in its defence of human freedom<sup>22</sup>. It is also a radical critique of both the ‘actually existing socialism’ of Stalinist Marxist theorising and of capitalist societies. This is not how socialist humanism has always been viewed. Thus, as we will see in chapter 5, although it enters socialist discourse as part of the rebellion against official communism in 1956<sup>23</sup> it would soon come to act as a piece of ideological cover for the regime of Nikita Khrushchev in the USSR<sup>24</sup> and for the attempts of the French communist party to woo over socialists and Catholics especially from the growing white collar occupations<sup>25</sup>. I will argue that there is nothing in the project of understanding human beings at least in part according to the categories of human agency, of reasons as well as causes, that must inevitably lead to either electoralist incorporation or to act as a cover for repression.

The sheer scale and ambition of MacIntyre’s work, in its account of the rise of the modern social and moral order and its dysfunctions, presents any prospective critic with an intimidating task. I have divided my attempt to get to grips with his work in the next six chapters into three sections that reflect distinct themes in my analysis of MacIntyre’s work. The first stage is an outline of MacIntyre’s Marxist humanism, its account of morality in terms of the satisfaction of desire and its optimistic account of

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<sup>22</sup> E. P. Thompson ‘The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors’ in *The Poverty of Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p88

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p129

<sup>24</sup> Louis Althusser ‘To my English Readers’ in *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London, NLB 1977) p11

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. pxxv

the moral resources available for critics of the existing order (chapter 1). The second covers MacIntyre's rejection of Marxism and his attempt to develop an account of the ethics of resistance in *After Virtue* and its sequels, a line of thought that also an account whose implications I broadly wish to reject (chapters 2, 3 and 4). Thirdly is my attempt, in the final two chapters, to present a defence of the project of socialist humanism that develops MacIntyre's earlier insights and also to defend it from some of its potential critics (chapters 5 and 6). A more detailed summary of arguments advanced in the different chapters can be found below.

### **Outline of the argument**

#### *Marxism, morality and revolution*

Chapter one begins by considering the development of humanist versions of Marxism in and around the first New Left of the late 1950s. This chapter therefore proceeds by looking at MacIntyre's attempt in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' to put forward a non-reductive account of the relationship of base and superstructure that is capable of finding a place for human agency (section 1.2) before turning to examine his account of a socialist morality that is justified as the satisfaction of our most important desires, desires which he believes can only truly be satisfied in community with others (1.3). Leaving aside the issue of whether humanism is truly compatible with Marxism for chapter 5, I then concentrate on MacIntyre's account of the satisfaction of desire as an account of positive freedom (1.4). I argue that Isaiah Berlin's warnings of the totalitarian implications of this idea are undermined by his complete failure to engage with Marxism as the *self*-emancipation of the working class (1.5). The issue of whether such an account of what we really desire can account for a reasonable pluralism I delay discussing until chapter 6.

The reason that I do not progress straight from chapter 1 to chapter 5 is very simply that MacIntyre himself came to repudiate his own earlier project (section 1.6). I do not find the reasons that MacIntyre gave in the 1960s to be very convincing.

However it did give rise to a critique of both the modern social order and also its critics in *After Virtue* and its sequels, that is worthy of consideration in its own right. Indeed it has even been claimed by Kelvin Knight, that if MacIntyre's earlier work raises important questions then his later work provides important answers<sup>26</sup>. It is the examination of this later stage in his work and what it might have to tell us that is therefore the subject of chapters 2-4.

*MacIntyre after Marxism: tradition based enquiry and the resources of resistance*

I begin my consideration of MacIntyre's trajectory after Marxism with an examination in chapter 2 of what he has to say in *After Virtue* about the role of moral philosophy in the overall social order. In many ways this is an obvious continuation of his account of the relationship between liberal morality and liberal society in the work of his Marxist period (section 2.1) and in sections 2.2 and 2.3 I attempt to defend and to extend what he says about emotivism and non-cognitivism in *After Virtue*. It is when MacIntyre turns to new territory in his examination of the relationship between philosophy and the overall direction of the social order, that he comes unstuck, as I will attempt to show from 2.4 to 2.7. Quite specifically I will argue that his account leads him towards both an unconvincing idealism and also to an almost wilful misinterpretation of the potential of the Marxist understanding of base and superstructure that strangely makes no reference to his own earlier work.

MacIntyre's account of a practical rationality that runs counter to the dominant capitalist logic of instrumental rationality is outlined and examined in chapters 3 and 4 - this is the supposedly 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' that Knight portrays as supplying answers to the problems raised by the earlier work. I begin in 3.1 by outlining his idea of 'practices' as providing a form of teleology that can replace Aristotle's discredited 'metaphysical biology'. However, as we will then see in 3.2, this is a form of rationality that he believes to be systematically undermined by proletarianisation. With the working class effectively excluded as a basis for resistance, MacIntyre must, therefore,

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<sup>26</sup> Kelvin Knight's editor's introduction to *The MacIntyre Reader* (Cambridge, Polity 1998) p1

find an alternative way in which we can order and evaluate our involvement in different practices: this he finds in the account of ‘traditions’ that he begins to develop in *After Virtue* (section 3.3). In 3.4 I look at how this idea develops into a fully fledged conceptual scheme governed by a ‘problematic’ in such works as *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* This, MacIntyre hopes to show, provides both an answer to the question of how we can order our involvement in practices, whilst also rejecting relativism, perspectivism and conservatism (3.5).

The problem with this position is that, as MacIntyre himself admits, coherent traditions as he understands them, can only be found at the margins of the modern social order (section 3.6). Thus we have an account of the resources for the limited resistance of ‘local’ communities that can, at best, hope to endure and outlast capitalism, but cannot realistically seek to overthrow it. Moreover, in 3.7, I ask whether cohesive traditions in MacIntyre’s sense even existed as a link between theorists like Aquinas and the subordinate social classes in the Medieval societies that he treats as providing us with working examples of tradition based enquiry and rationality.

In chapters 3 and 4 I suggest two main reasons for rejecting MacIntyre’s ethics of resistance. Firstly, I argue that MacIntyre has failed to make a convincing sociological case against the possibility of developing forms of working class consciousness that run counter to the dominant capitalist values, not only this but he has failed to get to grips with the complexities and contradictions of proletarianisation at all stages of his work (section 3.2).

In chapter 4 I examine, in greater detail, MacIntyre’s case for traditions as linguistically based conceptual schemes. This is an account of incommensurability between traditions that results in a failure of genuine translation (section 4.1). Against this I argue that, although a simple word for word translation between languages may



often not be possible, there is nothing in MacIntyre's account to convince us that successful interpretation of others is not possible, and that by explaining to us what it is about rival conceptual schemes that we cannot translate, he ironically demonstrates that successful interpretation is possible (section 4.2). For good measure, however, I also examine and reject what we might think of as the last ditch defence possible for theorists of conceptual schemes, that is to attempt to present us with evidence of an alien conceptual scheme of which we can make no sense at all (section 4.3). I argue that even such seemingly irrational thinking present in the magical beliefs of the Azande, or at least as they appear in the work of Evans-Pritchard, can be understood and successfully interpreted through the principle of humanity.

However, I believe that in studying and rejecting MacIntyre's account of tradition based rationality, we can see an important part of the outline of what an adequate account of our moral resources must contain. One key element, that arises directly from the preceding discussion, is the need for an understanding of human nature that is more than simply a conception formulated from the perspective of a particular conceptual scheme. This is a theme that I pursue in section 4.4 alongside the interesting story of MacIntyre's reintroduction of a tradition independent understanding of human nature in *Dependent Rational Animals*<sup>27</sup>. I end chapter 4 by arguing there is nothing wrong, per se, with the idea that our needs and desires do undergo a historical development and that such change need not undermine the claim that they presently have on us (section 4.5). However this thought can only be justified once his apparatus of traditions as conceptual schemes has been abandoned and the valid claims of human nature accepted.

### *In defence of Marxist humanism*

In the final two chapters of this dissertation I attempt to defend a form of Marxist humanism that is a development of MacIntyre's earlier perspective. In chapter

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<sup>27</sup> MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals* (op cit)

5 I justify the claim of any form of socialism that systematically employs humanist concepts of human agency and morality to call itself a form of Marxism. I begin by clearing away the charges of Stalinist anti-humanism and reformist humanism generated by the work of Althusser and E. P. Thompson (section 5.1). I follow this, in sections 5.2 and 5.3, by outlining the rival interpretations of the trajectory of Marx's thought to be found in Thompson and Althusser. In the process I argue that, for all their different insights, neither Thompson nor Althusser gives us a convincing exegesis of the direction of Marx's thought. When we turn to consider what an adequate Marxist position would look like, I argue that Althusser's account of the ideological state apparatus must be rejected (section 5.4) and, more broadly, that Marx's insights into the self-transformation of human beings require that we continue the perspective of human agency with its accompanying evaluative vocabulary (section 5.5). This is the Archimedean point from which I seek to criticise the anti-humanist elements in Marx's own work, as well as the accounts of some later Marxists. However, although this puts me broadly in agreement with Thompson's suggestion that we should pursue the project of understanding the 'part subject, part object' nature of human beings, I also criticise Thompson for failing to acknowledge fully the need to consider the influence of social structures in understanding human actions (5.6). We will also see that it is an interesting feature of MacIntyre's work, of both during and immediately after his commitment to Marxism, that he manages to zig-zag around this issue, at some points over emphasising human self-understanding and, at others, seeming to acknowledge the justifiable claims of structure. Finally in 5.7 I will criticise Thompson's continuing failure to theorise the nature of the Soviet Union and to get to grips with the inter-relation of economic and ideological factors, which MacIntyre's analysis can approach more fruitfully.

By the time we reach chapter 6 and I have established some grounds for claiming that there could be such a thing as Marxist humanism, I will move on to face head on the problem of value pluralism that remained an unresolved issue in chapter

1. The younger MacIntyre saw morality as the satisfaction of our most important desires, desires that he believed would be most truly fulfilled in genuine community with others. This gave him a critique of capitalist society and an outline for the moral resources that could help to sustain socialism. In 6.1 I consider, and reject, the account of conflictual desire in Thomas Hobbes and conflictual values in Max Weber. I do, however, accept that a defensible case can be made for some form of pluralism, even if I reject Berlin's assumption that such pluralism lead to forms of conflict that must inevitably undermine the socialist project (6.2). This is not, however, to claim that it is an easy point to establish, a point that I will pursue in my critique of the liberal optimism of J. S. Mill and Joseph Raz (6.3). After outlining the philosophical anthropology and the account of community to be found in Marx's early works (6.4), I go on to consider Will Kymlicka's attack on Marxist perfectionism (6.5). I argue that Kymlicka's case is not convincing and that Elster's account of the value of self-realisation can give us a plausible defence of Marx's position that need not deny reasonable pluralism (6.6). I also briefly discuss in 6.7 the place of work within an account of self-realisation. I finish by suggesting that out of the models of socialism so far developed, Pat Devine's account of 'negotiated coordination' seems to be the most satisfactory in the light of the forgoing discussion (6.8).



# Chapter 1

## Alasdair MacIntyre's Marxist humanism

This chapter looks at the account of Marxist humanism given by Alasdair MacIntyre in the late 1950s and early 1960s, beginning with his contribution to the debate in the *New Reasoner* about the role of morality in Marxist theory. I will argue for the superiority of MacIntyre's approach to this issue over that of his New Left contemporaries, such as E. P. Thompson. I will attempt to make a *prima facie* case for the general plausibility of MacIntyre's position, and give a response to some of its critics, however the reader will have to wait until chapters 5 and 6 for a full defence of the claims advanced here.

In section 1.1 I shall begin by looking at E. P. Thompson's attempt to formulate a form of socialist humanism, before I move on to set out the response to his case made by Harry Hanson. Having identified what is problematic in Thompson's work, I will move on to look at MacIntyre's own alternative attempt to formulate a Marxist humanism. Thus section 1.2 deals with MacIntyre's attempt to give a non-reductive account of the relationship of base and superstructure in Marx's thought, one that can find room for human agency and moral decision making, without renouncing the centrality of economic relationships. I will then move on, in section 1.3, to look at MacIntyre's account of morality as the satisfaction of desire, desires that he believes are educated in class struggle and can only finally be fulfilled by those things that we can have in common with others in a socialist community. I then turn, in section 1.4, to the issue of MacIntyre's account of the satisfaction of desire as a form of positive freedom, before arguing in 1.5, that MacIntyre's commitment to Marxism as a theory

of working class self-emancipation undermines Isaiah Berlin's critique of the totalitarian implications of Marxist thought. I do, however, acknowledge that much more needs to be said about the nature of the satisfaction of desire if this notion is to be shown to be compatible with reasonable pluralism in the nature of what we desire – a question that I will attempt to answer in chapter 6. Finally, in section 1.6, I look at MacIntyre's reasons for rejecting Marxism during the 1960s and the effect that this had on works such as *A Short History of Ethics*.

### 1.1 E. P. Thompson and the Philistines

In 1956 Khrushchev's admission of Stalin's crimes in his 'secret speech', followed later that year by the Hungarian uprising and its suppression by Soviet troops, led to what Michael Kenny describes as a 'profound political and ethical crisis' in the Communist movement<sup>1</sup>, one that would lead to around 10,000 resignations from the British Communist Party and the creation of a space for leftwing ideas, independent of both official Communism and the Labour Party, that became the first New Left<sup>2</sup>. For those like E. P. Thompson who left the Communist Party in the wake of these events, the obvious moral bankruptcy of official Communism and the need to come to terms with Stalin's crimes led to a re-examination the relationship between Marxism and morality.

However, questions about the moral and cultural content of Marxism were not entirely new. Thus, in 1958, in one of the most important books of the New Left, Raymond Williams suggests that throughout the 1930s, whilst claiming to recognise the material basis of culture, 'many Englishmen writing as Marxists' in fact drew on an older Romantic critique of capitalist society coming down through Matthew Arnold and

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kenny *The First New Left: British Intellectuals After Stalin* (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1995) p4

<sup>2</sup> David Renton *Dissident Marxism: Past Voices for Present Times* (London, Zed Books 2004) p115

William Morris<sup>3</sup>. Indeed, Thompson himself in the 1950s, before his break with the Communist Party, wrote in defence of William Morris and his attempt to graft a Romantic moral critique to the stem of Marx<sup>4</sup>.

By the time that Thompson came to write 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines', published in 1957 in the New Left journal, the *New Reasoner*, he no longer felt the need to defend the Soviet Union as he had previously done as a member of the Communist Party, but he was still committed to the notion that it was in some sense a socialist society. In this context he held the nature of Soviet society to pose a serious challenge for British socialists, since they had always had faith that 'socialism was not only economically practicable, but was also intensely **desirable**; that is, that socialist society would revolutionise human relationships, replacing the acquisitive society by the common weal'<sup>5</sup>. Soviet society, as the events of 1956 had recently highlighted, was morally repulsive. For Thompson, the explanation lay in the fact that the Soviet Union had 'sprung from the fire, its features blackened and distorted by pain and oppression' ruled over by a revolutionary elite that had degenerated into a bureaucracy<sup>6</sup>. As he conceived it, the need therefore was for socialists to engage in a moral criticism of the 'warped and militant philistinism'<sup>7</sup> that is represented by Stalinism, a revolt against both a form of ideological false consciousness and a revolt against inhumanity<sup>8</sup>.

Freed from the restraints of Communist orthodoxy, Thompson suggests that the false consciousness of Stalinism and the basic mistake at the heart of its theoretical

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<sup>3</sup> Raymond Williams *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (New York, Columbia University Press 1983) p271. The influence of 'Leavisite' protest against industrial capitalism on the first New Left is stressed by Lin Chun *The British New Left* (Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press 1993) p27.

<sup>4</sup> E P Thompson *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd 1955) p773

<sup>5</sup> E.P. Thompson 'Socialist Humanism: An Epistle to the Philistines' in *New Reasoner* 1957 number 1 p106

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. pp106-108

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p126

<sup>8</sup> Ibid. pp108-109

model, comes from its crude and mistaken use of the notion of economic base and ideological superstructure in Marx. For the Stalinist, human consciousness simply reflects its environment, the economic base determining the ideological superstructure. In this case human consciousness is reduced to 'a form of erratic, involuntary response to steel-mills and brickyards, which are in a spontaneous process of looming and becoming'<sup>9</sup>. Against this, Thompson argues that, although human experience does take place from within a given social and cultural environment, people are also able to think about their experience and come up with 'all sorts of weird, crazy, remarkable ideas' that are not simply a reflection of their class experiences alone<sup>10</sup>. This dialectical interaction between active and passive social consciousness and social being is, he argues, something that Marx and Engels always kept in view in their own analysis. The problem arose in their attempts to explain their ideas, something which led them to express them in terms of a 'make-believe 'model' of base and superstructure that did not exist in fact, only as a 'metaphor to help us to understand what does exist – men, who act, experience, think and act again'<sup>11</sup>. Real human beings, he argues, cannot have their ideas reduced to the passive experience of their social and economic conditions.

It is in this context that Thompson's account of moral reasoning needs to be understood. What he wishes to reject is the popular critique of Marxism in which the communist position is treated as essentially amoral, since it reduces morality to questions about what is effective or ineffective in bringing about socialism, a point of view in which the end justifies the means<sup>12</sup>. Thompson suggests that this interpretation can be correctly applied to Stalinism since it treats moral ideas as no more than the passive reflection of economic interests with no further significance. However this is just another manifestation of Stalinism's false view of human agency:

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p114

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p113

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p119



The Stalinist is fixated by Pavlov's dogs: if a bell was rung, they salivated. If an economic crisis comes the people will salivate good "Marxist-Leninist" belief. But Roundhead, Leveller, and Cavalier, Chartist and Anti-Corn Law Leaguer, were not dogs; they did not salivate their creeds in response to economic stimuli; they loved and hated, argued, thought, and made moral choices.<sup>13</sup>

Moral reasoning must therefore be set free from the crude base / superstructure model if its true significance in Marxist humanism is to be understood, allowing us to understand and appreciate the contribution of such figures as Shakespeare or Blake to an ongoing debate about human values:

'Timon of Athens' did not sway capitalism from its course, but it helped to ignite the mind of Marx; Blake's 'Songs' did not end human exploitation, but may have influenced the treatment of children in industry. Moreover, only casuistry could argue that Shakespeare or Blake were "reflecting" the future interests of the working-class. They were the tongues which – within the limitations of their time – spoke for **humanity**.<sup>14</sup>

The following *New Reasoner* contained a response to Thompson by Harry Hanson that raises important questions about his account of Marxist humanism. In 'An Open Letter to Edward Thompson' Hanson argues that although Marx and other Marxists have often spoken in socialist-humanist terms this has remained a 'foreign body, constantly setting up irritation' rather than part of the general theoretical structure. Stalin, he suggests, 'might even be congratulated on his Marxist consistency in eliminating it.'<sup>15</sup> For Hanson the truly Marxist justification for Stalinism's attitude to morality is that "really human" values can be fully realised only in the classless society of the future, in class divided societies they can only receive a 'partial, fitful and

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p122

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p p124

<sup>15</sup> Harry Hanson 'An Open Letter to Edward Thompson' in *The New Reasoner* number 2 (Autumn 1957) p80

distorted expression’<sup>16</sup>. Indeed the opportunities for the expression of truly human values may actually become more and more limited as class societies move towards the cataclysmic point of transformation to socialism and the morality of the battlefield becomes appropriate.

It is possible at this point to object that Stalinism cannot justify itself, even on these terms, if we hold that the means that it has chosen cannot possibly lead to the achievement of truly desirable ends. Thompson’s case is, however, in real difficulties, because, as Hanson points out, he accepts that the product of Stalinism’s bloody record in the Soviet Union was the achievement of a genuinely socialist economy. Thompson’s vision of socialism is, Hanson suggests, an ‘ideal picture’ in which William Morris is at the centre ‘arousing the workers to high minded creative endeavour.’<sup>17</sup> However:

when you turn from this picture to a much less ornamental reality, you are compelled to admit that a Communist Party whose practice has displayed, to say the least, few of these characteristics, has succeeded in doing something of which you fundamentally approve, viz. multiplying the “wealth of society”, vastly enlarging “cultural horizons” etc. You believe moreover, with Deutscher, that splendid things can and will be built on the basis thus laid.<sup>18</sup>

If the Soviet Union could indeed be described as socialist, he adds, the onus is very much on any critic to explain how this could have been achieved by less morally reprehensible means than those chosen in the circumstances.

Hanson himself does reject Stalinism. He begins his open letter by describing the ‘long-accumulated nausea’ that eventually led him to leave the Communist Party.

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p81

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p84

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

However he gives no clear justification for viewing his decision as anything other than a kind of squeamishness in the face of impeccable Stalinist argument. Indeed, he ends the letter with the comment that he would still support communism if he was an inhabitant of the Middle East or South East Asia in order to achieve economic development should the milder Indian path of development not prove more effective<sup>19</sup>. Blackledge and Davidson may have a point when they describe his position as motivated by a kind of 'implied Kantianism', an appeal to a moral law that stands outside of the historical judgments and passes judgment upon it<sup>20</sup>, but perhaps the most important conclusion about Hanson's comments is the overall lack of justification he can summon up for any alternative, a feature that we shall now see plays an important role in MacIntyre's contribution to this debate.

## 1.2 MacIntyre's 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'

Alasdair MacIntyre entered the Marxist humanism debate with his own suggestion of how we are to understand the appeal to human values within Marxism with a two part article in the *New Reasoner* that appeared at the end of 1958 and the beginning of 1959. 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' begins with the observation that the ex-Communist turned moral critic of Communism is a figure of 'genuine pathos' since he repudiates Stalinist crimes in the name of moral principle, but this appeal is made fragile by its apparently arbitrary nature:

Whence come these standards by which Stalinism is judged and found wanting and why should they have authority over us? What disturbs me in the character of these moral critics of Stalinism is not just their inability to answer this question. It is that this inability seems to me to arise from a picture of their

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p p90

<sup>20</sup> Blackledge and Davidson 'Introduction: The Unknown MacIntyre' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Essays and Articles, 1953–1974* (Leiden, Brill 2008) pxxiv

own situation, a picture profoundly influential among ex-Communists, which is at the root of much contemporary self-deception.<sup>21</sup>

The picture that disturbs MacIntyre is the suggestion that the Marxist must choose between two moral viewpoints. The first of these is Stalinism and its claim that the only standard of what is morally right is that which is pre-determined for individuals by the historical process so that, as he puts it, the 'ought' of moral principle is swallowed up in the 'is' of history. The second alternative is the position of the moral critic who is free to make moral judgments without reference to the determination of the historical process and for whom the 'ought' of principle is treated as completely external to the 'is' of history. But why according to this second alternative do these moral standards have any authority over us?

Simply because we choose that they should. The individual confronting the facts with his values condemns. But he can only condemn in the name of his own choice.<sup>22</sup>

The moral critic thus becomes a Quixote of the modern age, whose impotent condemnation is solely the expression of his or her own private and self chosen values. The critic cannot appeal to any shared public standard to condemn Stalinism and if he or she can declare '*Hier steh' ich, ich kann nicht anders*' ('Here I stand, I can do no other') those whom they criticise may do just the same<sup>23</sup>.

It is, therefore, crucial that MacIntyre identifies a third alternative that can link 'ought' and 'is' and provide a foundation for moral values. The first step is to provide a different account of 'is', since, if Stalinism is right to treat history as a process in which moral notions are simply mechanically determined by economic forces, the 'is' of

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<sup>21</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (op cit) p46

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp48-49

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p50

history will swallow up 'ought' just as the first alternative suggests. However, in challenging the Stalinist account of Marxism, MacIntyre also wants to avoid, what he terms the liberal empiricist approach that abandons any claim to understand the whole for fear of 'historicism', since this will leave us with history as an unexplained phenomenon that cannot be mastered by human will or desire – the result of which is a fatalism with regard to conscious human action that is a strange echo of Stalinism<sup>24</sup>. MacIntyre's goal is, instead, to allow human beings to make their own history<sup>25</sup> and so he is, therefore, led back to re-examine the claims of economic determinism that have also been read into Marx's work.

We have already seen that Thompson's humanism is also based on a challenge to the Stalinist interpretation of Marx's account of base and superstructure, however, MacIntyre's conception of the Stalinist's mistake is significantly different to that which we have encountered in the previous section. Thompson rejects economic determinism by characterising Marx's talk of base and superstructure as a 'make-believe' model that fails to capture what is most compelling and creative in Marx and Engels' own treatment of the ideological and the economic. For MacIntyre the Stalinist account of base and superstructure arises not from an over literal interpretation of Marx's simplified model, but instead has its roots in a more profound misunderstanding of the Hegelian categories of Marx's thought:

The predictability which Stalinism offered rested on its conception of a mechanical relation between basis and superstructure. But as Marx depicts it the relation between basis and superstructure is fundamentally not only not mechanical, it is not even [causal]. What may be misleading here is Marx's Hegelian vocabulary. Marx certainly talks of the basis 'determining' the superstructure and of a 'correspondence' between them. But the reader of Hegel's *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp51-52

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p56

understood in terms of the way in which the nature of the concept of a given class, for example, may determine the concept of membership of that class. What the economic basis, the mode of production, does is to provide a framework within which superstructure arises, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationships from which all else grows. The economic basis of a society is not its tools, but the people co-operating using these particular tools in the manner necessary to their use, and the superstructure consists of the social consciousness moulded by and the shape of this co-operation. To understand this is to repudiate the end-means morality; for there is no question of creating the economic base as a means to the socialist superstructure. Creating the basis, you create the superstructure. There are not two activities but one.<sup>26</sup>

Now, whatever the virtues or vices his interpretation holds as an exegesis of Marx's own thought, what this does is to allow MacIntyre both to reject the application of crude economic determinism to thought *and* to insist on an intimate relationship between the economic life of human beings and their ideas. Thompson's account will only accomplish the former task, leaving him with the possibility that the Soviet Union may be inappropriate for socialism in moral superstructure whilst genuinely having accomplished, or at least to be in the act of accomplishing, its tasks in the creation of socialism's economic base. For MacIntyre such a division should be ruled out, even if (as we shall see in the next section) he did not immediately show this level of understanding in practice.

So much therefore for the first alternative that swallows up 'ought' with the 'is' of the Stalinist account of history, but what of the divorce of 'ought' and 'is' in the worldview of the liberal moral critic? Fundamentally this is a position that promises freedom. For the ex-Stalinist turned moral critic it promises freedom from the

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid. pp54-55

subjugation of morality to the demands of 'history'. For the Western liberal it promises the freedom of the autonomous individual to contradict repressive traditions, contentious claims about what is 'natural' for human beings and conventional moral standards<sup>27</sup>. The autonomy of morality from factual statements, the famous gap between 'is' and 'ought' has also been defended as a logical truth. This is an idea that is given a classic formulation in R. M. Hare's *The Language of Morals* (1952) where he makes the claim that any moral or evaluative conclusion should be treated as a syllogism, in which the factual element is the minor premise which requires a major evaluative premise to form a valid conclusion<sup>28</sup>. On this basis, individual moral autonomy could be maintained even in the presence of divine commands, since these cannot be treated as morally compelling without the addition of the subject's commitment to some major evaluative premise such as 'one ought to obey God'.

We have already seen that, for MacIntyre, this kind of autonomy can only be won at the price of political impotence, since we can only condemn in the name of our own subjective commitment. However, MacIntyre's critique goes further and asks whether such an account does not also undermine the intelligibility of moral discourse itself. MacIntyre argues that human actions must be understood in terms of reasons as opposed to causes, a distinction that is illustrated by the way in which we interpret a nod of the head. When we relate such a nod to the giving of assent we can do so because we relate it to a human purpose, want or need. Without these, we simply have a physical movement that is either to be explained purely physiologically, as in a nervous tic or must fall into the anthropological category of that which is unintelligible, a survival or superstition that may once have related to human reasons but does so no longer<sup>29</sup>. It is just this last category into which the completely self-chosen and

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<sup>27</sup> For a good example of this see R M Hare's comments about the position of a feminist challenging the existing understanding of what a wife ought to do in his article 'Universal prescriptivism' in *A Companion to Ethics* edited by Peter Singer (Oxford, Blackwell 1993) p453

<sup>28</sup> See R. M. Hare *The Language of Morals* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1952) chapter IV

<sup>29</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) pp57-58

autonomous moral principle falls, since there is no reference to desire or need that could make it truly intelligible. MacIntyre suggests that to hold such a position is to:

make our moral judgments appear like primitive taboos, imperatives which we just happen to utter. It is to turn 'ought' into a kind of nervous cough with which we accompany what we hope will be the more impressive of our injunctions.<sup>30</sup>

However, even if the moral discourse that separates 'ought' from 'is', morality from desire, threatens to be unintelligible, this is not the only way that morality has been understood. MacIntyre therefore suggests a brief history of morality that tells the story of the different ways in which morality has been conceived:

For the Greeks the connection between the moral life and the pursuit of what men want is always preserved, even if sometimes very tenuously ... So it is too in the Bible. What God offers is something that will satisfy all our desires. (The commandment that we love our neighbours as ourselves both presupposes and sanctions a high degree of self-love.) And desire remains at the heart of morality in the Middle Ages. It is true that now morality becomes a matter of divine commandments, but the God who commands is the God who created our human nature and His commandments are in consequence desired to be such as will fulfil his purpose of blessedness for that nature. So that in Thomist ethics an Aristotelian view of desire and a Christian view of the moral law are synthesised, even if somewhat unsatisfactorily.<sup>31</sup>

What changes this is the Protestant reformation and its emphasis on the depravity of human nature. (How it changes this and how the *ideas* of the reformers are to be related to the kernel of the economic relationships of their society is unfortunately a

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p58

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p60



topic with which MacIntyre fails to deal either here or anywhere else as I will suggest in chapter 2.) This leads to a position where God's commands are to be obeyed simply because they are his commands and not because human beings can judge them to be good, or their fulfilment as good for our nature. With the link between morality and desire severed, the way is open for subsequent thinkers to maintain the autonomy of morality without reference to God<sup>32</sup>.

As MacIntyre himself summarises it, the four stages in the history of morality are therefore (1) 'Do this, because it will bring you happiness', (2) 'Do this because God enjoins it as the way to happiness', (3) 'Do this because God enjoins it', and finally (4) 'Do this'<sup>33</sup>. This is, of course, not the end of the story for MacIntyre, since he looks forward to a fifth stage where we can return to the previous understanding of the link between morality and desire on the basis of the potential of a socialist society to which I shall now turn.

### 1.3 Marx and the escape from the moral wilderness

Other than the challenge of how we are to bridge the gap between 'is' and 'ought', the other obvious problem for an account of morality that relies on desire, is that 'we want many and conflicting things'<sup>34</sup>. If what MacIntyre says is to have any plausibility, he must also supply an account of human nature that will explain what these desires really are and why they will not lead to endemic conflict. As he says, we need an account of morality which orders our desires as well as expressing them. What he is suggesting is not therefore a 'simple hedonism', something which MacIntyre says is as destructive of moral understanding as a belief in the complete

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<sup>32</sup> This is a history that MacIntyre repeats in his 1959 article on David Hume - A. C. MacIntyre 'Hume on 'is' and 'ought'' in *The Is / Ought Question* edited by W. D. Hudson (London, MacMillan 1969). Controversially MacIntyre here tries to claim Hume for an earlier 'Aristotelian' tradition that links morality and desire (ibid p46).

<sup>33</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p60

<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p59

autonomy of morality from desire<sup>35</sup>. As he himself has recently commented, his starting point in this work was the notion of 'informed desires' that bears comparison with James Griffin's work with its concern for the 'desires that persons would have if they appreciated the true nature of their object' and if they were educated 'so that they would be satisfied by attaining the objects of those desires'<sup>36</sup>.

This, of course, relies on the possibility of giving a compelling account of the demands of human nature, or at least the demands of human nature 'historically modified in each epoch'<sup>37</sup>. As we shall see, this is something that MacIntyre came to believe was not possible in his work from the mid 1960s onwards<sup>38</sup>. However, at this point, he needs to maintain both that such an account is viable and that it is compatible with a specifically *Marxist* project and he is, therefore, at pains to reject the claim that there is no account of human nature in Marx. He argues that Marx inherits from Hegel a conception of the 'human essence' that is striving for realisation, this, however, is a striving that has been limited in ways that are particular to different forms of society and so has never before truly been fulfilled. Socialism thus represents the possibility of finally being able to fulfil this nature in line with human wills and aspirations free from subservience to economic necessity and the 'law-bound inevitability of the past'<sup>39</sup>.

Tony Burns remarks that, with Hegel taking centre place in this account of human nature, 'Aristotle's philosophy is conspicuous by its absence'<sup>40</sup>. In fact Burns describes this period of MacIntyre's work as 'Marx without Aristotle' in contrast to the

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. pp58-59

<sup>36</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Where we were, where we are, where we need to be' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p318

<sup>37</sup> The reference here is of course to Marx's comments about Bentham in a footnote in Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One* translated by Ben Fowkes (London, Penguin 1976) p758.

<sup>38</sup> Although see section 4.4 below for the partial re-emergence of human nature in Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999)

<sup>39</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p56

<sup>40</sup> Tony Burns 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p39

central role that Aristotle will play either on his own, or as interpreted by Aquinas, from *After Virtue* onwards<sup>41</sup>. Aristotle is of course mentioned in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' as giving an account, admittedly in MacIntyre's opinion at the time, a rather odd one, of the connection between the moral life and what human beings want<sup>42</sup>. Similarly Aristotle's account of the practical syllogism appears in MacIntyre's account of the bridging of the gap between 'is' and 'ought' through the notion of 'wanting' in his 1959 paper on Hume<sup>43</sup>. Despite this, it is certainly fair to say that there is nothing here that anticipates the interest that has been shown in the relationship between Aristotle and Marx that began in the 1980s<sup>44</sup>. However the priority of Hegel at this point is not simply an oversight (interesting though the younger MacIntyre's more considered views on Aristotle would have been) but more importantly it is a reflection of MacIntyre's emphasis on the importance of change and development in his account of human desire and morality.

The development of self understanding and the relationship of the self with others also represents an interestingly 'Hegelian' as opposed to 'Aristotelian' line of enquiry. Thus MacIntyre suggests that a possessive and conflictual account of desire in Hobbes, or the 'pure dehumanised desire' of Nietzsche's superman, is inadequate as an account of the self that encounters others, a line of argument that he raises by way of a brief discussion of a passage from E. M. Forster's *Howard's End*. MacIntyre argues that the isolated calculating capitalist individual only 'wants' but cannot want as a self, or as Forster's Helen Schlegel puts it, 'They can't say "I"'. They *aren't* in fact ... Pierpont Morgan has never said "I" in his life. No superman can say "I want" because "I want" must lead to the question "Who am I?" and so to Pity and to Justice'<sup>45</sup>. These remarks

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p36

<sup>42</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p60

<sup>43</sup> MacIntyre 'Hume on 'is' and 'ought'' (op cit) p46

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Richard W. Miller 'Marx and Aristotle: A Kind of Consequentialism' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*; Supplementary Volume 7 (1981). On the interest shown in the relationship between Marx and Aristotle in the work that has come out since Miller see Burns 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' (op cit) pp41-42.

<sup>45</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p62

are left undeveloped, but they fit into a long tradition of arguing that the self cannot simply treat others as obstacles to its own will, because it requires uncoerced recognition from them to achieve its own identity. Fichte and Hegel are obvious figures to reference in this context<sup>46</sup>, as is MacIntyre's contemporary Charles Taylor, who would later insist that in order to locate itself in moral space the self must define itself through its interactions with others<sup>47</sup>. The echo of Hegel on the reconciliation of different self-consciousnesses, 'I' that is 'We' and 'We' that is 'I', is even more apparent when in MacIntyre's commentary on the above Forster passage where he argues that it is impossible to characterise a desire as something that 'I' have unless I am able to characterise myself as a member of society, or as he puts it, "'I' can only be put back into 'I want' if the 'we' is put back into 'we want'<sup>48</sup>. However, if Hegel's reconciliation takes place through the medium of Spirit, in MacIntyre it is to be achieved through a more down to earth account of the development of human desire.

Thus, although MacIntyre suggests that for both Hegel and Marx history is the story of human beings 'discovering and making a common shared humanity'<sup>49</sup>, for Marx the discovery and the education of desire is to be achieved in the 'experience of human equality and unity that is bred in industrial working-class life'<sup>50</sup>. To be more specific:

Capitalism provides a form of life in which men rediscover desire in a number of ways. They discover above all that what they want most is what they want in common with others; and more than this that a sharing of human life is not just

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<sup>46</sup> G. W. F. Hegel *The Phenomenology of Spirit* translated by A. V. Miller (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) section IV A 'The Truth of Self-Certainty'.

<sup>47</sup> See Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989) p35

<sup>48</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) cf. Hegel *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (op cit) §177

<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p64

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p65

a means to the accomplishment of what they desire, but that certain ways of sharing human life are indeed what they most desire.<sup>51</sup>

If such a social basis for the education of desire does exist, then MacIntyre's hope is that we can see moral rules not as injunctions independent of desire, but as important correctives against short term (perhaps we might add short sighted) selfishness that might prevent us from realising our desires.

This is a very important stage in MacIntyre's argument, but unfortunately the exact nature of the 'number of ways' in which capitalism can play this role is left undeveloped. Thus his only illustration of the education of desire is taken from Marx's comments in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* that, although communist workers may at first come together for the purely instrumental purpose of theory, propaganda and so on, the social relationships that start off as simply a means, will in time be discovered as an end in themselves<sup>52</sup>.

However what MacIntyre seems to have in mind is an account of working class culture as the site of collective institutions and class consciousness. For a more expansive contemporary summary of this vision we can turn to Raymond Williams writing in *Universities and Left Review* in 1957 where he suggests that:

The major cultural contribution of the working-class in this country has been the collective democratic institution, formed to achieve a general social benefit. It is true that the liberalizing middle class is capable of setting up institutions which function democratically within themselves, but it is always a characteristic of these institutions that they are ultimately, exclusive: they cannot, of themselves, be extended to cover society as a whole. Many working-

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p65. The passage to which MacIntyre is referring is from Karl Marx *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)* in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin 1975) p365.

class organizations of course begin as interest groups of a similar kind, but the characteristic of these is their further association, not only with other similar groups, but to the point where they cover or seek to cover the interests of a whole society. The growth of the Labour movement as a whole is the primary instance of this. It is indeed characteristic of working-class culture that the emphasis it has chosen is the emphasis of extending relationships. The primary affections and allegiances, first to family, then to neighbourhood, can in fact be directly extended into social relationships as a whole, so that the idea of a collective democratic society is at once based on direct experience, and is available, as an idea, to others who wish to subscribe to it.<sup>53</sup>

Such an account of the positive potential of working class life was, of course, open to challenge in the light of contemporary developments in post-war capitalism, a topic that was the subject of much discussion in the first New Left and one to which I will return as I discuss MacIntyre's own disillusionment with this perspective during the course of the 1960s in section 1.6 below. However, if such an account can be made tenable, then on this basis MacIntyre could go on to claim that, 'Moral rules and what we fundamentally want no longer stand in a sharp contrast' and the 'is' of desire can be brought together with the 'ought' of morality<sup>54</sup>. This in turn would allow MacIntyre to distinguish between the liberal who sees himself as choosing 'his' values and the Marxist who sees 'himself' as discovering them:

He discovers them as he rediscovers fundamental human desire; this is a discovery he can only make in company with others. The ideal of human solidarity, expressed in the working-class movement, only has point because of the fact of human solidarity which comes to light in the discovery of what we want. So the Marxist never speaks morally just for himself. He speaks in the

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<sup>53</sup> Raymond Williams 'Working class culture' in *Universities & Left Review* Vol.1 No 2 (Summer 1957) p31

<sup>54</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p65

name of whole historical development, in the name of a human nature which is violated by exploitation and its accompanying evils.<sup>55</sup>

Returning to Hanson, MacIntyre stresses that Marxism should not be construed as having a futurist morality. Drawing on his account of desire, he is able to characterise the crimes of Stalinism as acts which cut off their authors from humanity since:

in denying the rights and desires of others you deny that they and you share desires and rights in exactly the same way. You only possess either in so far as you have them in common with others.<sup>56</sup>

MacIntyre's response to Hanson is therefore obvious, Hanson is the isolated moral critic who asserts 'ought' without reference to the 'is' of desire, but how does his article relate to Thompson's earlier account of Marxist humanism? We have already seen how, in their different ways, both MacIntyre and Thompson seek to free moral discourse from the mechanical determination of the economic base. For MacIntyre this realisation allows us to correctly characterise the relationship between morality and desire. However, for Thompson in his 'Epistle to the Philistines', we are not given anything more specific than that moral judgements reflect the point of view of our 'humanity'. This impression can be rectified if we go back to the publication of his study of William Morris in 1955. Here Thompson defends the Marxist orthodoxy of Morris's attempt to graft Ruskin (and hence Romantically inspired moral critique) 'to the stem of Marx'<sup>57</sup>. From this perspective, capitalism enriches the possibilities of life, whilst, at the same time, denying them to the oppressed and distorting the mind and sensibilities of the oppressors<sup>58</sup>. Within this context he treats Morris's moral critique

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p66

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. pp96-97

<sup>57</sup> E P Thompson *William Morris Romantic to Revolutionary* (London, Lawrence and Wishart Ltd 1955) p773

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p833

not as the subjective feelings of a 'settled sentimental socialist'<sup>59</sup> or the imposition of 'some idealist absolute'<sup>60</sup> that stands outside of the historical process, but as the result of the human 'aspiration' to realise the possibilities for human fulfilment as they unfold within the historical process and unite necessity and desire<sup>61</sup>.

If there is an important similarity between Thompson and MacIntyre at this point the superiority of MacIntyre's account needs to be stressed in two crucial respects. Firstly if Thompson is to appeal successfully to desire and aspiration, he must follow MacIntyre in suggesting why this will not lead to the competition and division of individualistic desires. The account of the desire for society and the requirements of intersubjectivity which MacIntyre sketches would, therefore, have to be a necessary development of his own account. Secondly, Thompson's account of base and superstructure still reflects an inability to deal with the nature of the Soviet Union and may even press his account towards a kind of Romantic idealism. For example in his 1959 lecture to the William Morris Society, he stresses the continuing importance of Morris's moral critique and suggests that if Morris's importance had been properly recognised:

perhaps fewer Marxists would have been found who could have supposed that the overthrow of capitalist class power and productive relationships could – by itself – lead on to the fruition of a Communist community: that, if the forms of economic ownership were right the rest would follow. They would have realised – as Morris proclaimed in all his work – that the construction of a Communist community would require a moral revolution as profound as the revolution in economic and social power.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>59</sup> Engels' description, see E. P. Thompson's 1959 speech to the William Morris Society <http://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1959/william-morris.htm>

<sup>60</sup> Thompson, *William Morris* (op cit) p831

<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p833

<sup>62</sup> E. P. Thompson Speech to the William Morris Society (1959) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/thompson-ep/1959/william-morris.htm>



To the extent that this passage rejects a crude economic determinism and stresses the impossibility of conceiving socialism independently of the conscious understanding and moral commitment of human beings, this is an acceptable summary of socialist humanism aspiration. However what Thompson continues to do, is to conceive the construction of socialist economic forms as conceivable in surroundings with an oppressive and non-socialist ideological superstructure. In this case it is hard not to sympathise with Hanson's suggestion that the two are to be brought back together for Thompson, not by the dialectic of history, but by 'the power of the word'<sup>63</sup>.

However, before moving on to the next section, we need to observe that, although MacIntyre's accounts of base and superstructure open up the possibility of a better treatment of the Soviet Union than that to be found in Thompson, this does not mean that he was immediately able to achieve such a thing in practice. By 1962 he described Sartre as 'both a victim and a propagator of the myth that the present-day Soviet Union has something to do with socialism'<sup>64</sup>. However in 'The Algebra of the Revolution', an article reviewing Raya Dunayevskaya's book *Marxism and Freedom* which appeared in the autumn 1958 *Universities and Left Review*, he is highly critical of Dunayevskaya's analysis of the 'state-capitalist' nature of the Soviet Union. This, he suggests:

leads her into a fantastic under-valuation of socialist achievement in the Soviet Union. She writes of the Soviet state as though the Moscow trials, Vorkuta, and Hungary were its supreme and authentic expressions. And because of this standpoint she tends to treat as Soviet crimes and heresies what are in fact at least attempts to face the problems of a socialist society<sup>65</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> Harry Hanson 'An Open Letter to Edward Thompson' (op cit) p87

<sup>64</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Sartre as Social Critic' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p207

<sup>65</sup> MacIntyre 'The Algebra of Revolution' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p43

At the time MacIntyre was a member of the Socialist Labour League<sup>66</sup>, which as an orthodox Trotskyist group, held that state ownership of the means of production in the USSR ensured its nature as a workers' state, even if the power of the Stalinist bureaucracy gave it a degenerated form<sup>67</sup>. It is this context that seems to lead MacIntyre to combine, for a time, a sophisticated account of the inter-relationship of base and superstructure, with an analysis of the Soviet Union that represented the same division between the economic and the political which hampered Thompson's analysis. As we have now seen, Thompson's dualism invites reunification either by way of Kantian deontology or the Romantic belief in 'the power of the word'. By contrast, MacIntyre's comments on Sartre in 1962 seem to bear the fruits of his rejection of this perspective as he moved into the circle of the International Socialists which had broken with the idea of a degenerated workers' state in favour of an understanding of the Soviet Union as a non-socialist formation, in Tony Cliff's terminology 'bureaucratic state capitalism'<sup>68</sup>. Such an account rejects the dualism shared by Thompson and orthodox Trotskyism, in favour of an analysis of Soviet society in which the fundamental economic organisation is of a piece with the oppressive rule of the bureaucracy and the Soviet Union's relationship to the global capitalist state system<sup>69</sup>.

It is a measure of how fast MacIntyre was moving at this period that he could adopt such different modes of analysis in such quick succession, only to add a third perspective three years later with his virtual disengagement with Marxism in its entirety. However, before we turn to look at this issue, we must first consider the two

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<sup>66</sup> Neil Davidson 'Alasdair MacIntyre and Trotskyism' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (op cit) p156

<sup>67</sup> For a longer explanation of the orthodox Trotskyist understanding of a degenerated workers' state see Alex Callinicos *Trotskyism* (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press 1990) pp15-16

<sup>68</sup> See Tony Cliff *State Capitalism in Russia* (London, Bookmarks 1996)

<sup>69</sup> 'From the form of property alone – whatever private, institutional or state property – abstracted from the relations of production, it is impossible to define the class character of a social system. For this it is necessary to know the relation between people and the process of production, the relation between toilers and the means of production.' Tony Cliff quoted in Callinicos *Trotskyism* (op cit) pp74-75. My argument here is that we must reject the idea that the Soviet Union was socialist not that state capitalism as Cliff describes it is necessarily the only way in which it can be understood.

final essays in which he continued to develop the perspective of Marxist humanism at the start of the 1960s.

#### 1.4 Positive and negative freedom

MacIntyre's suggestion in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' is that, despite the fact that we seem to want 'many and conflicting things', a viable Marxist ethics should attempt to reunite morality and desire. In short he hopes that it is possible to show that the Hobbesian notion of our desires leading to a ceaseless war of each against all, reflects the contingent nature of capitalist society, rather than a necessary feature of human nature, something that can be addressed as the experience of class struggle educates desire and teaches us that what we really want is that which we can share in common with others. Of course a lot more remains to be said if this suggestion is to be fully developed and there is much that MacIntyre did not himself have time to address as he progressively moved away from Marxism in the course of the sixties. In this section I will look at how he develops his account of desire and its relationship with freedom in 'Freedom and Revolution' and 'Breaking the Chains of Reason' both published in 1960. In particular I will examine how his account stands in relation to Isaiah Berlin's critique of the rationalist assumptions which he detects in the dominant forms of the positive conception of freedom in his hugely influential 1958 essay 'Two Concepts of Liberty'.

MacIntyre's starting point in 'Freedom and Revolution' is Hegel's notion that freedom is the essence of human beings and that to be free is to be able to make one's 'desires, intentions and choices effective'<sup>70</sup>. Desire and freedom are therefore intimately linked and, consistent with what we have already seen in the previous section, MacIntyre's invocation of Hegel is a clear rejection of any tradition that treats freedom as necessarily separate from or opposed to desire. However, he is also not simply asserting that the free person is the one who can get whatever he or she

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<sup>70</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Freedom and Revolution' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* edited by Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p124

happens to want. MacIntyre suggests both that one may be free and dissatisfied, indeed, in our society 'the more the ferment of freedom is at work in a man the more dissatisfied he will be', and that you can be satisfied and unfree – at least in the short run since, 'The drug addict gets what he wants; but he is a slave to his short-term craving'. With this in mind MacIntyre goes on to distinguish between two senses of what it is to get what one wants:

There is the sense in which to get what one wants is to follow and satisfy one's immediate and short-term impulses; but there is also the sense in which to get what one wants is to attain what will in the long run and at every level in fact satisfy. Often, to get what one wants in the first sense can stand in the way of getting what one wants in the second sense.<sup>71</sup>

He goes on to suggest that if I am to know what will really satisfy I can look for guidance from the decisions that others have made throughout history. However the results of such a study must take into account the manner in which past societies have both brought to light new possibilities for human nature and also frustrated human possibility through the exploitative nature of their class relationships. In short:

the discovery of the kind of life that will satisfy is the discovery of the kind of life in which fundamental desires, intentions and choices are made most effective, in which man is most agent and least victim.<sup>72</sup>

Hegel and freedom also stand at the centre of 'Breaking the Chains of Reason'. Again his starting point is Hegel's account of freedom and the understanding of human action in terms of purposes and intentions in which human possibility grows 'through conflicts of principle and purpose'. According to MacIntyre, Hegel's account of history is that of a process that involves 'a dialectic of contradictions, intelligible not as natural

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

events are, or as a machine is, but rather as a conversation or an argument are'<sup>73</sup>. He suggests that, for Hegel, human history is a series of developing purposes in which reason is able to overcome conflicts and attain freedom. Moreover:

At every stage in human history, the growth in reason and the growth in freedom are inseparable. Only in so far as reason guides action are men free to discern alternative possibilities and to frame purposes. Only in so far as the realm of freedom extends does reason have force against the non-rational.<sup>74</sup>

The central theme of his essay is the failure of the modern intellectual to play the role of rebel and critic, something which he connects with the tendency in post-Hegelian thought to break the crucial link between freedom and reason and to engage instead in a debate defined by the opposition of the equally unappealing alternatives of negative and positive freedom<sup>75</sup>. It is to Berlin's 1958 essay on these two concepts of liberty that we therefore need to turn.

The first thing that needs to be said is that, although MacIntyre voiced his dissatisfaction with both positive and negative conceptions of freedom (for reasons to which I shall turn to shortly), we should have little doubt that Berlin would have categorised him as an exponent of 'positive' freedom. The concern of negative freedom, as Berlin understands it, is to identify the area within which the subject 'is or should be left to do or be what he is able to do or be, without interference by other persons'<sup>76</sup>. By contrast positive freedom instead concerns the wish to be one's own master, as Berlin puts it:

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<sup>73</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Breaking the Chains of Reason' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* edited by Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p139. Compare MacIntyre's Hegel at this point with Peter Winch *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London: Routledge 1990) p128 where Winch states that 'social interactions can more profitably be compared to the exchange of ideas in a conversation than to the interaction of forces in a physical system'.

<sup>74</sup> MacIntyre 'Breaking the Chains of Reason' (op cit) p139

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Isaiah Berlin 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1969) pp121-122

I wish my life and decisions to depend on myself, not on external forces of whatever kind. I wish to be the instrument of my own, not of other men's, acts of will. I wish to be a subject, not an object; to be moved by reasons, by conscious purposes, which are my own, not by causes which affect me, as it were, from the outside.<sup>77</sup>

From the question of whether I am my own master in respect of other human beings, the next step can be to follow Plato and Hegel in asking whether I could be a slave in relation to my own unbridled passions. If this is the case, then I can conceive myself as having a 'higher nature' distinct from such passions, that is:

the self which calculates and aims at what will satisfy it in the long run, with my 'real', or 'ideal', or 'autonomous' self, or with my self 'at its best'; which is then contrasted with irrational impulse, uncontrolled desires, my 'lower' 'heteronomous' self, swept by every gust of desire and passion, needing to be rigidly disciplined if it is ever to rise to the full height of its 'real' nature.<sup>78</sup>

With the exception of the alarmingly authoritarian tone of the end of this passage, the significance of which I will consider below, this certainly sounds familiar from what MacIntyre wrote about freedom in 1960. However, there is already one important ambiguity in Berlin's account, since he seems to lay no importance in the distinction between a Kantian account of positive freedom that seeks to sever reason from all desire and those, like MacIntyre, who seek to link reason with the fulfilment of our most important and enduring desires. With this proviso we may, however, conclude that MacIntyre does indeed hold to a form of positive freedom in Berlin's sense.

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p131

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. p132

Berlin states in the introduction to his *Four Essays on Liberty* that positive liberty understood as an answer to the question 'By whom am I governed' is a valid universal goal<sup>79</sup>. He also acknowledges the very real possibilities for the misuse of negative liberty<sup>80</sup>. However, the main thrust of his essay is a warning of what he regards as the far greater danger in the twentieth century posed by the transformation of positive liberty into its opposite, a favoured weapon of despotism where oppression is invoked in freedom's name<sup>81</sup>. Since, as he relates the story, both Hegel and Marx stand squarely in the latter camp of enemies of genuine human freedom, his conclusion is obviously one that is highly congenial to the world view of cold war liberalism despite his less prominent acknowledgment of the brutal possibilities of laissez-faire capitalism.

But how can a legitimate concern with being one's own master lead to such dangerous conclusions? Berlin identifies a series of stages in the corruption of the positive conception that would allow it to be used as an instrument of tyranny. If we begin with the notion that we have two selves, the higher and the lower, we may come to conclude that those who are dominated by their lower selves are not really free – divorced as they are from their higher motives. If I add to this the notion that I may know the higher selves of others better than they do themselves then I may also conclude that to coerce them in the name of this higher self is not the restriction of freedom but rather a way of helping them to achieve true freedom:

Once I take this view, I am in a position to ignore the actual wishes of men or societies, to bully, oppress, torture them in the name, and on behalf, of their 'real' selves, in the secure knowledge that whatever is the true goal of man (happiness, performance of duty, wisdom, a just society, self-fulfilment) must

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid. pxlvii

<sup>80</sup> Ibid. pxlvi

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. ppxliv

be identical with his freedom – the free choice of his ‘true’, albeit often submerged and inarticulate self.<sup>82</sup>

In short we arrive at the Orwellian position that tyranny is liberation.

If we wish to avoid transforming freedom into its opposite, but also do not want to stop asking the kind of questions that lead to a concern for positive freedom (some of which at least Berlin himself acknowledges as legitimate) we must therefore find a way of stopping short of this conclusion. One of the things that Berlin does is to refuse to endorse the whole notion of a higher or rational will over and above our empirical desires. However even as supportive a critic of Berlin as John Gray rightly holds that such a distinction is important for our understanding of deliberation and that ‘no viable conception of liberty can altogether dispense with considerations deriving from the difficult idea of the real or rational will’<sup>83</sup>. However, even if we are to allow the evaluation of our desires in the light of a higher understanding of ourselves, a topic to which I shall return in the final chapter, Berlin believes that he has identified a more basic motivation that may tempt otherwise decent people to continue to the bitter end, that is the notion that all of the rational goals of human beings must be compatible and that continuing conflict must therefore be the result of profound irrationality on the part of others. Indeed Berlin suggests that according to this doctrine it is only the apparent existence of irrationality that leads to the wish to oppress, exploit or humiliate others since rational people will respect the principle of reason in each other and lack ‘all desire to fight or dominate one another’<sup>84</sup>. The mass of people therefore need to be educated if life is to be tolerable for the rational and if they are not to be ‘compelled to withdraw to a desert or some Olympian height’. However the problem is that the uneducated ‘cannot be expected to understand or co-operate with the purposes of their educators’ and must therefore be coerced into

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p133

<sup>83</sup> John Gray ‘On Negative and Positive Liberty’, *Political Studies* 28 (4): 507–26. (1980) p518

<sup>84</sup> Ibid. p146



changing<sup>85</sup>. It is therefore the rationalist belief in what Berlin dubs a 'final solution' to the recalcitrant nature of human beings which, he suggests, 'more than any other, is responsible for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals' and motivates the misuse of the positive conception of freedom<sup>86</sup>.

### 1.5 Desire, freedom and politics

Berlin therefore raises problems about the nature of desire being proposed by MacIntyre and about the kind of politics necessary to ensure the satisfaction of desire. We have previously seen that MacIntyre is both giving what is recognisably a positive account of freedom and also suggesting that the conflict between individualistic desires is a contingent feature of capitalist society that can be overcome. If we are to understand why his conception of freedom does not commit him to travelling in the direction that Berlin has outlined, we need to return to his dissatisfaction with the use of both positive and negative freedom in 'Breaking the Chains of Reason'. Here he suggests that both are the 'ghosts of dead political philosophies' that need to be 'exorcised':

In the name of positive freedom, men have been called free so long as they are being tyrannised over for their own good. In the name of negative freedom, men have been called free when enclosed by ignorance and their natural situation, provided only that nobody was actively coercing them. Certainly, belief in negative freedom is less obviously vicious than belief in positive freedom, but so long as the choice is between these two, one can understand both why belief in freedom is not an active inspiration in much of our social life and why intellectuals have not felt that their vocation committed them to a devotion to freedom. For, in both these concepts, the interconnection between reason and freedom which is essential to the Hegelian concept is lost sight of.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid. pp148-149

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p167

<sup>87</sup> MacIntyre 'Breaking the Chains of Reason' (op cit) pp139-140

The understanding of freedom that MacIntyre envisages is not, therefore, a denial of the usefulness of the distinction between two conceptions of freedom, rather his aim is to maintain the critique of forms of oppression that are ignored by a narrowly conceived negative conception of freedom, whilst rejecting the very paternalism that Berlin seems to believe is inseparable from the Marxist tradition and from the work of Hegel<sup>88</sup>.

The rejection of paternalism turns on the question of where we locate the agency by which the desires of human beings are to be educated. The key assertion in Berlin's account is that positive freedom becomes corrupted when the educators come to believe that 'the uneducated cannot be expected to understand or co-operate with the purposes of their educators', who are, therefore, licensed to force them to be free. Such a position has a lot in common with the belief expressed by Isaac Deutscher, in his biography of Trotsky, that the revolutionary prophet will eventually come to a point where he must be able to make the people believe by force, but it is not compatible with the project of classical Marxism as MacIntyre understands it<sup>89</sup>. Crucial to this is the third of Marx's 'Theses on Feuerbach', two short passages of which MacIntyre was to return for inspiration long after his eventual abandonment of Marxism<sup>90</sup>. Marx's argument here is that those materialists who see human beings as the passive product of their environment and so seek to change others through the manipulation of their circumstances, end up exempting themselves from their own analysis, dividing society into a superior group of educators and those who are to be changed. On the contrary Marx suggests that:

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<sup>88</sup> Unlike Berlin, MacIntyre sharply distinguishes Hegel from the paternalism of the Victorian or post-Victorian idealists who followed him. Compare MacIntyre 'Breaking the Chains of Reason' (op cit) pp139-140 with Berlin 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (op cit) p150.

<sup>89</sup> For example, see MacIntyre's comments on Deutscher's biography of Trotsky in Alasdair MacIntyre 'Trotsky in Exile' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit)

<sup>90</sup> See for example, Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) pp84-85 and Alasdair MacIntyre 'The *Theses on Feuerbach* A Road Not Taken' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998)

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as *revolutionary practice*.<sup>91</sup>

It is for this reason that, after discussing the third thesis on Feuerbach in 'Communism and the British Intellectuals' (also published in 1960), MacIntyre argues that classical Marxism stands in 'stark contrast' to any manipulative project, instead, 'it wants to transform the vast mass of mankind from victims and puppets into agents who are masters of their own lives.'<sup>92</sup> Here we return again to the critique the Stalinist's understanding of the historical process, for it is the crude determinism of objective and unchangeable laws of history which have no role for human agency, which allows the party bureaucrats to justify the manipulation of the rest of mankind. By contrast MacIntyre places himself in the tradition of the *self*-emancipation of the working class. As he puts it in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness':

Socialism cannot be impersonally manipulated into existence, or imposed on those whose consciousness resists, precisely because socialism is the victory of consciousness over its previous enslavement by economic and political activity. All other forms of society have been suffered by men; socialism is to be lived by them.<sup>93</sup>

The significance of such passages as the third thesis on Feuerbach for the understanding of Marx's work is, therefore, fully grasped by MacIntyre, whereas it is passed over, almost in silence, by Berlin. It is true that, in his book on Marx, Berlin does discuss the third thesis and correctly summarises the challenge that it poses to

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<sup>91</sup> Karl Marx 'Theses on Feuerbach' in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London, Penguin 1975) p422

<sup>92</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Communism and the British Intellectuals' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p119

<sup>93</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p56

any theory that would divide humanity into masses 'helplessly exposed to every influence' and their teachers who must free them, but no general conclusions are drawn as to the overall nature of Marx's project<sup>94</sup>. It is also true that Berlin does describe Marx and Engels as 'fundamentally solid German democrats in their attitude to the masses' when discussing their opposition to the hero worship of Lassalle<sup>95</sup>. This statement must, however, be put into the less flattering context of Berlin's suggestion that the failure of the revolutions of 1848 changed Marx's views of the 'intelligence and the reliability of the masses and their leaders' and led him to attribute an 'incurable stupidity' to both that would direct much of the rest of his life dealing with the technical problems 'of what method it was best for revolutionary leaders to adopt in the interests of their uncomprehending flock'<sup>96</sup>. After 1848 Berlin's Marx, therefore, seems to be a fairly crude exponent of what Hal Draper terms 'socialism from above'<sup>97</sup> whether or not elections are supposed to play some part in the lives of these human sheep. With this assumption in mind Berlin has no problem in outlining over two pages, Bakunin's argument for an alternative to Marx that is 'organized from below' without considering a Marxist response other than the, in this context highly ambiguous, need for unity between revolutionaries<sup>98</sup>. Most importantly perhaps, Berlin is also able to discuss the Inaugural Address of the First International, which he describes as 'after the Communist Manifesto, the most remarkable document of the socialist movement', and to quote the opening statement that 'That the emancipation of the working class must be conquered by the working class themselves' without feeling at all moved to comment or to explain how this could be made to fit with his central claims about Marx<sup>99</sup>.

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<sup>94</sup> Isaiah Berlin *Karl Marx: His Life and Environment* (London, Oxford University Press 1963) p144

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. pp212-213

<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p174

<sup>97</sup> Hal Draper *The Two Souls of Socialism* (1966)

<http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1966/twosouls/index.htm>

<sup>98</sup> Berlin *Karl Marx* (op cit) pp232-235

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p224

If one is to give an account of freedom that can only truly be realised through the education of desire, a crucial distinction must be made between theories where an elite is to educate the people and force them to be free and those that reject paternalism and see this education as a process that arises 'from below'. Berlin ignores this second possibility. This presents obvious exegetical problems for his reading of Marx. It is, at the end of the day, simply mysterious why, if he is right, Engels would ever have believed that he could declare in a later introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* that 'our notion, from the very beginning, was that 'the emancipation of the working class must be the act of the working class itself''<sup>100</sup>.

However for the working class to reach class consciousness more or less spontaneously is one thing, the problem is that for many people it is quite another to do what MacIntyre did at this time which was to advocate the necessity of forming a vanguard party along Leninist lines. It is an established orthodoxy of social democratic, liberal and anarchist critics that such a method of organisation is intrinsically authoritarian, the attempt by a revolutionary elite to substitute themselves for the people they claim to represent. This is indeed a claim that MacIntyre himself had come to accept by the early 1970s in 'Ideology, Social Science and Revolution' where he claims that the revolutionary belongs alongside the orthodox social scientist and the industrial manager, as one who employs an ideology of expertise that 'embodies a claim to privilege with respect to power'. Thus the revolutionary is someone who 'cannot avoid the elitism that he identifies in others'<sup>101</sup>.

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<sup>100</sup> Engels's introduction to the *Communist Manifesto* quoted by Hal Draper in 'The Principle of Self-Emancipation in Marx and Engels' in *Socialist Register* (1971) <http://www.marxists.org/archive/draper/1971/xx/emancipation.html>

<sup>101</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Ideology, Social Science and Revolution' in *Comparative Politics* volume 5, no. 3 (April 1973) p342

However, as Blackledge points out<sup>102</sup>, the problem with MacIntyre's later condemnation of the revolutionary is that it only seems to succeed by failing to distinguish management from leadership in its many forms. The irony, of course, is that his own earlier work suggested an understanding of leadership that could be clearly distinguished from managerial manipulation. Thus, in 'Freedom and Revolution' he portrays the party as an organisation that generalises from particular struggles of the working class and keeps alive the knowledge of what capitalist society is. He adds that it may well be that 'the working class will not and cannot find the road to freedom spontaneously', but it is also the case that 'until the working class finds this way, no one else can find it for them'. The role of activists is, therefore, to use their ability to generalise between different struggles in the light of their knowledge of the system as a whole, to help to move the working class into *conscious* political action<sup>103</sup>. The party is, therefore, in a delicate dialectical relationship with the working class, but on MacIntyre's understanding, it cannot seek to substitute its own consciousness and agency for theirs and is, therefore, utterly divorced from the Stalinist conception of the party. As he reminded socialist activists in 1959, socialists must always avoid the notion that they were intellectuals 'sent from heaven or the Fabian Society in order to guide the labour movement from above with their theorising'<sup>104</sup>.

The irony of MacIntyre's work at the end of the 1950s, is that he is denying the necessity of authoritarian and substitutionalist forms of political organisation and maintaining a commitment to working class self-emancipation as a (soon to be purged<sup>105</sup>) member of the authoritarian Socialist Labour League. However the point is that the politics of the SLL, or for that matter of Stalinist organisations claiming to

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<sup>102</sup> Paul Blackledge 'Leadership or management: some comments on Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of Marxism' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p120

<sup>103</sup> MacIntyre 'Freedom and Revolution' (op cit) pp131-132

<sup>104</sup> MacIntyre quoted in Blackledge and Davidson 'Introduction: the Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) pxxix

<sup>105</sup> Neil Davidson 'Alasdair MacIntyre and Trotskyism' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p160.

stand in a Marxist or Leninist tradition whilst abandoning any form of democratic or emancipator politics, stand condemned on specifically Marxist grounds that, contrary to Berlin, have a clear and central place in the thought of Marx and Engels. The question of what form leadership can take in the context of a genuine project for self-emancipation, once blatantly anti-democratic forms have been excluded, is one that ultimately, I believe, depends in large part on our assessment of the general prospects of class consciousness and the resources of resistance in the lives of the majority of people to whom political leadership addresses itself. So, if MacIntyre's optimism about the positive potential of working class culture within the capitalist order is rejected, then the possibility of revolutionaries exercising genuine leadership in Blackledge's sense is indeed undermined, but it is undermined for this reason and not because of some supposed affinity between the activity of the revolutionary and manipulative forms of management. It is therefore to MacIntyre's growing pessimism about the radical potential of the working class to which I will now turn.

### 1.6 MacIntyre's rejection of Marxism

As we have now seen, MacIntyre's way out of the moral wilderness and his account of the (self-) education of desire relies on an understanding of the positive potential of working class consciousness, such as that which Williams discusses when he talks of the major cultural contribution of the working class lying in collective institutions in which 'the idea of a collective democratic society is at once based on direct experience'<sup>106</sup>. However this was an account that by the late 1950s was increasingly being put in doubt by perceived changes to working class identity in an era of increasing affluence<sup>107</sup>.

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<sup>106</sup> Williams 'Working class culture' (op cit) p31

<sup>107</sup> See, for example, Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (London, Pelican 1958) – originally published by Chatto and Windus in 1957 and hence the immediate context of the *Universities and Left Review* articles by Williams and Stuart Hall.

In the *Universities and Left Review* article from which I have just quoted, Williams raises the possible objection that the working class by moving into new types of housing and acquiring new products such as cars, television sets and washing machines were in the process of becoming 'less proletarian and more bourgeois'<sup>108</sup>. To this he responds that the bourgeoisie of the nineteenth century were no less bourgeois in the absence of these things and that 'a culture, a whole way of life, is never reducible to its artefacts'<sup>109</sup>. However the fear expressed by Stuart Hall in his much discussed 1958 *ULR* article 'A Sense of Classlessness' was that, under the direction of new power elites, who 'are probably the smartest and most far-seeing that have ever been in the business'<sup>110</sup>, post-war capitalism, was undergoing forms of social change that went beyond the mere possession of semi-detached houses and televisions. Thus, he argues, rising real wages lead to a different class consciousness than the situation of continual decline in wages and the proletarianisation of the middle class assumed by Marx<sup>111</sup>. Secondly, he argues that in the new automated industries repetitive and alienating work was diminished and the line between the skilled worker and the minor technologist was being broken down. Moreover, there was the possibility of the labour force being integrated with the demands of the firm through forms of joint consultation and 'personnel management'<sup>112</sup>. Finally, and perhaps most fundamentally, Hall also raises the prospect of fundamental changes arising from the worker's growing consciousness as a consumer rather than simply a producer of commodities. Indeed, he suggests, it is becoming the case that the worker knows 'himself' 'more as consumer than as producer'<sup>113</sup>. This opens the destructive possibility, from the perspective of a distinctive class consciousness, of the working class putting its feet tentatively on the status ladder in which the community is

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid. p30.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p31

<sup>110</sup> Stuart Hall 'A Sense of Classlessness' in *Universities & Left Review* 5 (Autumn 1958) p32

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. pp27-28

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p28

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. pp28-29



separated into 'a series of separate, competing individuals' a situation where each must 'go it alone',<sup>114</sup>.

MacIntyre did not explicitly engage with any of these issues in his Marxist humanist essays of 1958-1960. When, in the first half of the 1960, he does start to back away from the optimism that he had shown concerning the working class, his reservations seem to start off from a belief in the stability of post-war capitalism and the superior organisational powers of the capitalist class and not, in the first instance at least, primarily with a shift of working class identity arising directly from consumerism.

By the early 1960s MacIntyre had joined the International Socialists who, following Tony Cliff and Michael Kidron, were arguing that the long post war boom, that had allowed a growth in working class affluence, was underpinned by the unprecedented arms economy that contained the seeds of its own contradictions and crises. However, as Neil Davidson points out, MacIntyre, in common with those former members of the *Social Labour League* who had formed *Solidarity*, accepted the position of Paul Cardan's *Socialisme au Barbarie* group and maintained that capitalism had definitively overcome its tendency to economic crisis<sup>115</sup>.

Thus MacIntyre was to argue in his 1963 essay 'Prediction and Politics' that the practice of the capitalists had been transformed by 'conscious, intelligent innovation' and that growth and stability could be maintained and future economic crises avoided<sup>116</sup>. However, if the capitalist class was able to reflect on its previous experience so as to strengthen its grip on society, MacIntyre came to believe that working class consciousness has suffered 'diminution after diminution' as workers

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. p29

<sup>115</sup> Davidson 'Alasdair MacIntyre and Trotskyism' (op cit) p161

<sup>116</sup> 'Just as pig-breeders could, by becoming conscious of the pig-cycle, cease to be dominated by its ups and downs, so surely the capitalists too could by becoming conscious of the business cycle learn how not to be dominated by it.' MacIntyre 'Prediction and Politics' in Blackledge and Davidson (eds.) *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* (op cit) p256

became divided as a result of the division of labour<sup>117</sup>. This was also the theme of MacIntyre's talk at an International Socialist summer school in 1962 where he compares the concern with pay differentials (and hence, he believes, a fragmentation of class consciousness) amongst steel workers at Port Talbot with the commitment to solidarity implied by the rejection of increased differentials between drivers and conductors agreed by the London busmen. Of these cases he concludes:

solidarity is bred where you have an industry in which workers have continually been on the defensive in which their position has been continually worsened and which they are working under difficult conditions and which they are essentially very weak. In that situation, you find that solidarity is unfortunately bred of weakness and the fragmentation is bred of strength...<sup>118</sup>

In this document he does add that socialists must find ways to counteract this divisive tendency, but his pessimism about the ability of working class consciousness to rise above sectional interests is readily apparent.

Following MacIntyre's 1964 review of Lucien Goldmann's *Hidden God*, Blackledge and Davidson suggest that the optimistic belief that human beings are capable of achieving authentic values through their own thoughts and actions, can be seen as a wager<sup>119</sup>. However, useful though this may be, it would be wrong to see MacIntyre's earlier commitment to the potential of the working class as a simple leap of faith. Rather it was based on a sociological understanding of the emancipatory potential of working class culture that, by the mid-1960s, he could no longer maintain. Moreover his swift transformation from uncritical acceptance of a robust working class consciousness to deep pessimism also points to a deeper failure to be able to theorise

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Talk to International Socialist day school at Calton House Settlement, Finsbury Park, London in 1962. This talk is given the title 'The New Capitalism and the British Working Class' in Blackledge and Davidson (op cit) p226

<sup>119</sup> Blackledge and Davidson 'Introduction: the Unknown Alasdair MacIntyre' (op cit) pxxxvi

the contradictory nature of working class consciousness and of the capitalist order as a whole. The third 'Gramscian' option of developing a consistent socialist perspective from the 'strangely composite' elements of personality generated by capitalism is not, therefore, pursued. Indeed, whatever influence Gramsci's work was beginning to have through thinkers of the New Left, it would play no significant part in the development of MacIntyre's work, either at this point or later in the project that he would launch in earnest with *After Virtue*. This is a point that I have cause to stress as I come to look at the later developments of his ideas in chapters 3 and 4.

But, whatever criticisms might be levelled against the severity of MacIntyre's pessimism at this point, its results can clearly be seen in his treatment of the nature of ethical disagreement in *A Short History of Ethics* (1966). In the final chapter 'Modern Moral Philosophy' MacIntyre asks how we can appeal to moral judgments as more than simply personal likes and dislikes. What he suggests is that such an appeal can be made from within a society 'in which the form of life presupposes agreement on ends', giving us a 'recognized list of virtues, an established set of moral rules, an institutionalized connection between obedience to rules, the practice of virtues, and the attainment of ends.' Such a society will be able to make a clear distinction between evaluative language and the language of liking or choice for so long as such a well-integrated form of moral life can be maintained. However, he is clear that in our society 'the acids of individualism have for four centuries eaten into our moral structures' with effects that MacIntyre suggests have been both for good and for ill. The individualist response is to treat the social order 'not as a framework within which the individual has to live out his moral life, but as the mere sum of individual wills and interests'<sup>120</sup>. This has been rejected by such philosophers as Hegel, Green or (he suggests to a lesser extent) Bradley whose work attempts 'to specify the type of community within which the moral vocabulary can have a specific and distinctive set of

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<sup>120</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (London, Routledge 1998) p258

uses', but which, MacIntyre suggests, is no substitute for the deed of recreating it<sup>121</sup>. The twist is that by 1966 he treats Marx's work not as providing us with a way out of the moral wilderness, but instead as demonstrating the way in which morality could act as a form of ideological manipulation invoking 'an authority which no longer exists and to mask the sanctions of social coercion'<sup>122</sup>.

In place of the earlier attempt to link morality and desire, MacIntyre suggests instead that ours is an inheritance of a plurality of moral perspectives in which 'Aristotelianism, primitive Christian simplicity, the puritan ethic, the aristocratic ethic of consumption, and the traditions of democracy and socialism have all left their mark upon our moral vocabulary'<sup>123</sup>. Rather than look for a way in which critical thought might forge a critical and consistent world view, as a Gramscian perspective might attempt, this form of contradictory consciousness is treated as an insuperable fact. Thus, between these different moral perspectives and between any of these perspectives and 'those who stand outside all of them', incommensurability is now the rule with no impersonal standard to which it is possible to appeal<sup>124</sup>. As he suggests:

Conceptual conflict is endemic in our situation, because of the depth of our moral conflicts. Each of us therefore has to choose both with whom we wish to be morally bound and by what ends, rules, and virtues we wish to be guided ... I must choose for myself with whom I am to be morally bound. Not that I stand naked until I have chosen. For our social past determines that each of us has some vocabulary with which to frame and to make his choice. Nor can I look to human nature as a neutral standard, asking which form of social and moral life will give to it the most adequate expression. For each form of life carries with it

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. p259

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p257

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. pp257-258

its own picture of human nature. The choice of a form of life and the choice of a view of human nature go together.<sup>125</sup>

We therefore seem to be left with nothing but an assertion of our will to endorse or not endorse Marxism or any other perspective, this as we learnt earlier, is the situation of those lost in the moral wilderness.

## 1.7 Conclusion

MacIntyre's Marxist humanist work makes an interesting attempt to break free of both the Stalinist dismissal of morality and the impotence of treating moral criticism as nothing more than the personal preference of autonomous individuals. However, as we have also now seen, by the mid-1960s he had obviously come to view both Marxism and the solidarity that he had once believed to be present in working class movements, as a dead end. It was from this starting point that MacIntyre was to begin the philosophical rethinking of his position that he undertook in his new life in the United States and which would culminate in the very different route that he would attempt to find out of the moral wilderness in *After Virtue* and the major works that would follow it. It is this alternative account for which MacIntyre is most well known and it is the one that I will examine in the following three chapters.

I will argue in what follows that this later perspective fails to provide an adequate account of the moral resources for opposition that are available within capitalist society, but what of his earlier statements? It is also obvious from the perspective of over half a century that, whatever Hall or the MacIntyre of the early 1960s might have believed, capitalism has not solved its tendency to crisis and that the working class has not been seamlessly integrated into the capitalist order. Indeed the years that followed MacIntyre's abandonment of Marxism and his emigration to the US were indeed marked by major class conflicts within advanced capitalist societies, most

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p259

spectacularly the May 1968 general strike in France<sup>126</sup>. Against this, as I will briefly consider in 3.2 below, concerns about the effects of consumerism, as well as new technologies and methods of organisation in the work place have continued to be cited as reasons to be sceptical about the kind of vision of class consciousness that MacIntyre treats as unproblematic in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'. I will also argue that MacIntyre's failure to get to grips with the contradictory nature of class consciousness, that we have already witnessed in the straightforward optimism of his earlier work, will crucially undermine his later attempts to get to theorise the resources of resistance.

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<sup>126</sup> See for example Chris Harman *The fire last time: 1968 and after* (London, Bookmarks 1998) chapter 5



## Chapter 2

### The place of moral philosophy in the overall social order

Kelvin Knight's suggestion that MacIntyre's earlier work raises important questions, but that it is in the later work that he provides important answers, is in one way or another a central target for my criticism over the next three chapters<sup>1</sup>. In this chapter I will suggest that a significant unanswered question in works such as 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' is the relationship between moral discourse, as it appears both in philosophical theorising and in ordinary life, and the broader social order in which these are situated. I will argue that the later work, as represented most importantly by *After Virtue*, is in fact at its strongest when it is raising very similar questions and problems, most importantly in his account of the failings of emotivism, which is itself a recognisable development of his earlier critique of 'liberal morality'. However, when it comes to providing us with answers, I will argue that the later work does not represent any improvement on MacIntyre's earlier partial failure to adequately theorise this particular aspect of the relationship between what, in Marxist terms, would be called economic base and moral superstructure. In many ways it represents a step backwards.

I begin in section 2.1 by discussing the younger MacIntyre's account of the striking correspondence between moral ideas and the overall social order of capitalism. I will argue that his work of this period seems to point in at least two contradictory directions, that is it points, either to a sophisticated (though at this point untheorised) inter-relation, or to an almost idealist commitment to the causal powers of moral discourse.

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<sup>1</sup> Kelvin Knight's editor's introduction to *The MacIntyre Reader* (Cambridge, Polity 1998) p1



In 2.2 I turn to the replacement of MacIntyre's earlier emphasis on the role of 'liberal morality' in his Marxist work with the focus on emotivism, and to some extent ethical non-cognitivism in general, in *After Virtue*. Emotivism is crucial for MacIntyre since it marks the point at which moral philosophy is no longer able to distinguish the giving of reasons from the attempt to subject others to psychological influence. I will argue in this section that MacIntyre is correct to believe that, consistently applied, such a position does represent what he terms in *A Short History of Ethics* as 'a thoroughly unpleasant world in which everyone is always trying to get at everyone else'<sup>2</sup>.

In 2.3 I will also defend MacIntyre's very brisk attempt to extend his analysis of emotivism to non-cognitivism *tout court*. Here I will suggest that MacIntyre's analysis can be extended from his own critique of R. M. Hare's prescriptivism to include more recent and more sophisticated forms of non-cognitivism such as the quasi-realism of Robin Blackburn or the norm expressivism of Allan Gibbard.

In 2.4 I will take stock and examine MacIntyre's analysis of emotivism and its more sophisticated non-cognitivist siblings as a broadly secondary phenomenon that reflects an important aspect of the social order without itself being causally central. This is a position with which I broadly agree, although I will also argue that, at this point in his work, MacIntyre can be criticised for sticking too closely to the idea that emotivism arises simply as a reflection of moral usage within our social order, rather than acknowledging the roots that non-cognitivism has in the desire for freedom.

Whatever issues there are with MacIntyre's account of the problems raised by emotivism, the real problems begin when I turn to the answers that his later work suggests about the origins of the social order in which emotivism finds its place. Beginning with an account of his extraordinary statements about the role of philosophy in creating the modern order in 2.5, what we find is an overemphasis on the role of

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<sup>2</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (London, Routledge 1998) p251

reason and the work of theorists in creating the world. This is a failure that, as we will see in 2.6 and 2.7, is not helped by his misunderstanding of the possibilities of historical materialism, or by his attempt to invoke Karl Polanyi as an alternative to Marxism. I will argue, therefore, that we have every reason to reject MacIntyre's own later attempt to relate the failures of moral philosophy with the failures of a broader social order.

## 2.1 Moral philosophy and capitalist society in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'

MacIntyre's argument in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' is that the central feature of moral theorising in the twentieth century is that, although we may justify particular actions with reference to general principles, this is to appeal to ultimate principles that are themselves beyond any rational justification. So, when it comes to morality one can only choose<sup>3</sup>. Thus analytical moral philosophy of the mid twentieth century ends up in agreement with Sartrean existentialism, with both sides affirming unconditional and arbitrary choice as *a*, or even *the*, central feature of an individual's moral life<sup>4</sup>. This is a feature that, he remarks, corresponds strikingly to the 'actual moral condition of many people in our society'. As he puts it:

For them their moral principles are completely isolated from the facts of their existence and they simply accept one set of principles rather than another in arbitrary fashion. They affirm this or that 'ought'; but their morality has no basis. I am not speaking here of the morality of intellectuals which might be thought (albeit wrongly) to reflect the philosophical currents; I am speaking of the largely inarticulate whose moral discourse nevertheless provides the standard and normal usage in our society.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) pp47-48

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p48

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

The thought of the philosopher therefore seems to grow out of, and give theoretical expression to, a form of moral discourse that already exists in our society. However, MacIntyre also suggests that for the ex-Stalinist turned moral critic at least, the great attraction of this position is its offer of freedom to choose what to value and condemn without reference to the prison of historical inevitability or the needs of the Party. But this aside, whether the understanding of morality employed by the 'inarticulate' is itself a causal factor in the existence of the moral wilderness, whether it is to be regarded simply as an effect, or whether it can be said to be in any kind of dialectical relationship with it, is not clear in this text.

However although such broader questions remain unanswered if we look elsewhere in the same article there also seems to be evidence of a commitment on MacIntyre's behalf to a far more important role for philosophical and religious ideas in his account of the genesis of our existing moral wilderness. Thus, in his account of the development of beliefs about the relationship of the moral life and desire, he claims that moral discourse in both the Greek and Medieval worlds was able to maintain a connection between morality and desire, and hence a coherent account of moral discourse, and that what changed this and broke the link between the two is the Protestant Reformation<sup>6</sup>. We could conceivably interpret this as a form of idealist analysis in which it is the development of a set of ideas in the heads of Luther, Calvin and others that creates the moral predicament of contemporary society. Such an interpretation would, however, clash with MacIntyre's emphasis in the same essay on the need to understand the interconnection between the economic base of society and its ideological superstructure, indeed to see other relationships as growing around the kernel provided by economic relationships<sup>7</sup>. If it had been his intention, at this point, to develop this perspective, then perhaps we could interpret the Protestant Reformation as part of a broader transformation of (Western) European society that

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p60

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp54-55

was not solely driven by autonomous ideas. The problem is that the manner in which the development of ideas is supposed to relate to the broader social reality is simply left untheorised in MacIntyre's Marxist work with no real indication of how the two are to be related. This is a problem that seems to connect to MacIntyre's emphasis on understanding actions in terms of the agent's own self understanding<sup>8</sup>, a perspective that, by itself, could preclude the attempt to situate ideas in a broader economic and structural context. This is a problem to which I will return in 5.6 below.

## 2.2 Why emotivism fails as an account of morality

By the time that MacIntyre came to write *After Virtue* he was ready to come back to the question of how to relate morality and moral philosophy to the broader social context in which it existed, although, this time, without any commitment to understanding this within a Marxist framework. The other major change was that in place of the criticism of 'liberal morality' in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', in *After Virtue* it is 'emotivism' that is the focus of MacIntyre's attentions.

Crucial to the emotivist approach is the suggestion that we understand the meaning of moral language as the expression of feelings and attitudes. As set out by C. L. Stevenson (whom MacIntyre identifies as 'the single most important exponent of the theory') a moral statement such as 'This is good' means roughly the same as 'I approve of this; do so as well'<sup>9</sup>. What we are dealing with here is, therefore, a form of non-cognitivism. As Alexander Miller explains, in contrast to cognitivists who claim that moral judgments express beliefs that can be true or false, for the non-cognitivist moral judgments express non-cognitive states such as emotions or desires which are not

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<sup>8</sup> For example, 'To identify the limits of social action in a given period is to identify the stock of descriptions current in that age.' Alasdair MacIntyre 'A mistake about causality in social science' in Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman *Philosophy, Politics and Society* (Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1962) p60

<sup>9</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) p12. Also, Charles, L. Stevenson *Ethics and Language* (New Haven, Yale University Press 1945) Chapter II 'Working Models'

‘truth-apt’ and are not, therefore, capable of being true or false<sup>10</sup>. In fact, in the hands of philosophers like Stevenson and A. J. Ayer, emotivism is the most directly and unapologetically non-cognitivist of all moral theories, one that, unlike the later accounts that we will encounter in the next section, pays little heed to the need to explain the apparent truth-apt construction of our moral language.

However the apparent simplicity of emotivism hides a crucially important problem, that is how we are to identify specifically moral approve approval or disapproval:

‘Moral judgments express feelings or attitudes,’ it is said. ‘What kind of feelings or attitudes?’ we ask: ‘Feelings or attitudes of approval,’ is the reply. ‘What kind of approval?’ we ask, perhaps remarking that approval is of many kinds. It is in answer to this question that every version of emotivism either remains silent or, by identifying the relevant kind of approval as moral approval – that is, the type of approval expressed by a specifically moral judgment – becomes vacuously circular.<sup>11</sup>

This emptiness and circularity has important consequences. MacIntyre observes that the special prestige of moral statements is that they are not simply one form of influence amongst others, but rather allow the appeal to an objective and impersonal standard<sup>12</sup>. By denying this and placing will or choice at the centre of the individual moral life in the manner of the emotivist we lose the ability to distinguish between forms of persuasion that work by giving reasons and those that involve psychological pressure and lead to unfounded beliefs, a distinction that Plato makes in his *Gorgias* and which MacIntyre highlights in *A Short History of Ethics*<sup>13</sup>. In short, a consistently emotivist viewpoint would have no sound reasons to give to oneself or

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<sup>10</sup> Alexander Miller *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (Cambridge, Polity 2003) p3

<sup>11</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp12-13

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp19-20

<sup>13</sup> MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (op cit) p26

others and the whole would resemble what MacIntyre, again in *A Short History of Ethics*, describes as 'a thoroughly unpleasant world in which everyone is always trying to get at everyone else'<sup>14</sup>.

This account of the social content of emotivism has been challenged from the non-cognitivist camp by Simon Blackburn who has described MacIntyre's accusation as 'ridiculously beside the point'<sup>15</sup>. In his book *Ruling Passions* he even goes so far as to suggest that the attraction of cognitivism is its appeal to the status of the Apollonian attributes over the Dionysian, reason over the passions, light over darkness, or ('In the bad old days') the male over the female. In short he suggests that the traditional bias is that 'ethics belongs to the government, and not to the mere things that need governing'<sup>16</sup>. On this basis he suggests that we can see why this picture of ethics as based on the power of reason will appeal to those who claim authority, 'why it informs the rhetoric of the mandarin classes':

If you stalk Washington or Paris or London, framing policy and advising governments, the last thing you want to admit is that all you have in your pocket is a tissue of attitudes, or desires, or emotions.<sup>17</sup>

However the problem with this argument is that it does not take account of the different ways in which it is possible to appeal to reason, and in doing so Blackburn misses, or deliberately obscures, a distinction that is crucial to the form of social criticism given by MacIntyre and others such as Max Horkheimer. The problem is that the bureaucratic rationality of Blackburn's mandarin class is fundamentally a rationality of the effective achievement of means and not the evaluation of ends. As MacIntyre reminds us, it is the failure of rational authority to appeal to any rational criteria other

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p251

<sup>15</sup> Simon Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1984) p197

<sup>16</sup> Simon Blackburn *Ruling Passions* (Clarendon Press, Oxford 1998) pp88-89

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p90

than effectiveness that is central to Max Weber's account of bureaucracy<sup>18</sup>. What we are dealing with here is what Horkheimer describes as a 'subjective' or 'formalised' reason, something that can be contrasted with the kind of 'objective' reason that does engage in the evaluation of ends<sup>19</sup>. Thus, from the perspective of 'objective' as opposed to 'subjective' / 'formalised' reason it really might be less reasonable to prefer the scratching of my finger to the destruction of the entire world or to prefer my own acknowledged lesser good to my greater<sup>20</sup>. This is the sense of reason that the emotivist is missing and which the bureaucracies of modern society simply do not need to appeal to, even if from time to time they may also clothe themselves in more traditional and objective sounding moral language. Blackburn does himself no credit by obscuring these two distinct conceptions of reason, even if he is entitled to remind us of quite how unacceptably hierarchical and sexist pre-modern appeals to objective rationality could be.

However, even though Blackburn's response fails, we do need to recognise that emotivist theory is not simply the product of manipulative technocrats or that emotivists themselves necessarily countenanced manipulative social relationships. Thus, the very straightforward nature of A. J. Ayer's emotivism in *Language, Truth and Logic*<sup>21</sup> in the 1930s did not prevent him from also opposing Franco, or appeasement, amongst commitments to other progressive causes<sup>22</sup>. The problem is that, on Ayer's own account, the moral stand that he took in such cases was derived from a theory of moral commitment that he likened to the arbitrariness of supporting Tottenham rather than any rival London football team<sup>23</sup>. But just like the ex-Communist turned liberal moral critic, if the emotivist chooses this route to establishing moral freedom, the

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<sup>18</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p26

<sup>19</sup> Max Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason* (London, Continuum 2004) pp3-4

<sup>20</sup> David Hume *Treatise on Human Nature* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1978) Book 2, Part 3, Section iii. p416

<sup>21</sup> See A. J. Ayer *Language, Truth and Logic* (London, Penguin 1971) p143

<sup>22</sup> See Ben Rogers *A. J. Ayer: A Life* (London, Chatto and Windus 1999) pp131-132. Interestingly Rogers describes Ayer as possessing 'an unusually developed sense of justice' *ibid.* p132.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.* p26

option is there for others to assert opposite conclusions with equal force leaving us with the battle of one will against another. Or, as Horkheimer puts it in *Eclipse of Reason*, it is a situation in which:

reason has been so thoroughly purged of any specific trend or preference that it has finally renounced even the task of passing judgment on man's actions and way of life. Reason has turned them over for ultimate sanction to the conflicting interests to which our world actually seems abandoned.<sup>24</sup>

What we have therefore is a failure of such emotivists to think through the implications of emotivist theory, a thought that is expressed by MacIntyre in *After Virtue* when he argues that if emotivism is true, then our inherited moral language would have to be abandoned<sup>25</sup>. The point, therefore, is that emotivism *properly thought through* is a position that is in the interests of those in a position of power and not of those who seek to resist them, regardless of whether either side does consistently think the matter through to this conclusion, or whether society as a whole has come to embody this account of rationality.

### 2.3 Do other forms of non-cognitivism share emotivism's weaknesses?

The heyday of emotivism had long been over when MacIntyre published *After Virtue* in 1981 and it has not grown any more popular since then. As MacIntyre himself recognises, the attention that analytical philosophers have paid to carefully analysing moral reasoning and its use of logical linkages did, 'by and large', lead them to reject emotivism<sup>26</sup>. However, his focus on emotivism is not simply a historical relic. Firstly, as we will see in the next section, he is fundamentally interested in emotivism as an account of how we have come to use moral statements rather than simply as a mistaken account of their meaning. Secondly, he argues that the most

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<sup>24</sup> Horkheimer *Eclipse of Reason* (op cit) p7

<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p20

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.



influential accounts of moral language that developed from the critique of emotivism (on the non-cognitivist side at least) terminate in assertions for which no reason can be given and so place choice in a quite mistaken way at the centre of our deliberation. In which case the failures of emotivism did not end with Stevenson and the rest, but were continued in R. M. Hare's prescriptivism<sup>27</sup>. This, of course, is just the claim that MacIntyre is also making in his comments on liberal morality in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'.

MacIntyre's account of the failure of later forms of non-cognitivism is indeed brief. It is a discussion that scarcely lasts for two paragraphs in chapter 2 of *After Virtue*. It is also a topic to which he returns again briefly in a single paragraph in his 1994 essay 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' where he suggests that it is both 'difficult and unnecessary' to respond to Simon Blackburn's version of non-cognitivism, suggesting, very briskly, that such theories fail to relate the attitudes allegedly expressed in a moral statement to the form of assertions which they make<sup>28</sup>.

However, the accusation that later forms of non-cognitivism have failed to give an account of the crucial distinction between moral and non-moral forms of approval and disapproval is, I think, a fair one that can be upheld in a more sustained discussion of non-cognitivist accounts of morality. Before I move on to discuss emotivism as a theory of the usage of moral statements and the origins of the emotivist society in section 2.4, I will therefore spend some time in 2.3.1 and 2.3.2 examining the non-cognitivist account of moral discourse to be found in the work of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard.

### 2.3.1 Simon Blackburn's quasi-realism

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. pp20-21

<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity 1998) p212

Blackburn's starting point, for what he terms his 'quasi-realist' account, is to endorse non-cognitivism by treating ethics as the expression or projection of emotions and commitments, a position which, he believes, fits a naturalistic account of reality far better than its rivals. As he puts it, projectivism requires nothing more than the existence of a natural world and patterns of reaction to it<sup>29</sup>. This does not, however, mean that he wishes to deny what he terms 'the surface phenomena of language', that is 'the fact that we use moral predicates, and apply truth or falsity to the judgements we make when we use them', a fact that poses a serious problem for the projectivist<sup>30</sup>. A classic formulation of the difficulty that this surface phenomenon poses (and one that MacIntyre himself endorses<sup>31</sup>) is the famous Frege-Geach problem, which suggests that expressive theories of ethics go wrong by attributing a different meaning to moral terms in asserted contexts, 'It is wrong to tell lies' and in unasserted ones, 'If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies'. However if this is the case then something seems to have gone badly wrong with the projectivist case, as is illustrated in this example:

It is wrong to tell lies.

If it is wrong to tell lies, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies.

So, it is wrong to get your little brother to tell lies.<sup>32</sup>

This would seem to be a valid exercise in ethical reasoning, but this can only be the case if the same meaning is given to both the asserted and unasserted uses of 'It is wrong to tell lies', something that projectivism seems committed to denying<sup>33</sup>.

Blackburn's suggestion is that the use of such language makes sense from a projectivist point of view, once we acknowledge the importance of assessing

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<sup>29</sup> Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (op cit) p182

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p196

<sup>31</sup> MacIntyre 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' (op cit) pp211-212

<sup>32</sup> Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (op cit) p189

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. pp189-190

someone's overall moral sensibility. In this context, putting our commitments into conditionals will allow us to work out their implications, as he puts it:

not all such sensibilities are admirable. Some are coarse, insensitive, some are plain horrendous, some are conservative and inflexible, others fickle and unreliable; some are too quick to form strict and passionately held attitudes, some too sluggish to care about anything. But it is extremely important to us to rank sensibilities, and to endorse some and to reject others. For one of the main features affecting the desirability of the world we live in is the way other people behave, and the way other people behave is largely a function of their sensibility. So much is obvious enough. And amongst the features of sensibilities which matter are, of course, not only the actual attitudes which are the output, but the interactions between them. For instance, a sensibility which pairs an attitude of disapproval towards telling lies, and an attitude of calm or approval towards getting your little brother to tell lies, would not meet my endorsement. I can only admire people who would reject the second action as strongly as they reject the first. It matters to me that people should have only this pairing because its absence opens a dangerous weakness in a sensibility. Its owner would have the wrong attitude to indirect ways of getting lies told (and for that matter the wrong attitude to his little brother).<sup>34</sup>

To tell the story another way, he asks us to imagine that we start out from an imaginary language  $E_{ex}$  in which emotivism is more obviously embedded than ordinary English, for example it possesses a 'hooray!' operator (H!) and a 'boo!' operator (B!) that can be placed alongside such activities as telling the truth or telling lies to signal our approval or disapproval. He argues that, even if this were the case, the speakers of such a language would want another device that allowed them to express views on the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid. p192

structure of sensibilities as well as a notation with which to endorse or reject various couplings of attitudes, or couplings of beliefs and attitudes<sup>35</sup>.

In short,  $E_{ex}$  needs to become an instrument of serious, reflective, evaluative practice, able to express concern for improvements, clashes, implications, and coherence of attitudes. Now one way of doing this is to become like ordinary English. That is, it would invent a predicate answering to the attitude, and treat commitments as if they were judgements, and then use all the natural devices for debating truth. If this is right, then our use of indirect contexts does not prove that an expressive theory of morality is wrong; it merely proves us to have adopted a form of expression adequate to our needs. This is what is meant by 'projecting' attitudes onto the world.<sup>36</sup>

Blackburn argues that his quasi-realism allows us to avoid the suggestion that moral judgment is unimportant, a mere question of my own preferences, by appealing to our commitment to second order preferences that evaluate and help to order our first order attitudes. He, therefore, denies that he is committed to arguing that the judgement 'kicking dogs is wrong' implies that it is wrong to kick dogs just because I think that it is wrong<sup>37</sup>.

Suppose someone said 'if we had different sentiments, it would be right to kick dogs', what could he be up to? Apparently, he endorses a certain sensibility: one which lets information about what people feel dictate its attitude to kicking dogs. But nice people do not endorse such a sensibility. What makes it wrong to kick dogs is the cruelty or pain to the animal. That input should yield disapproval and indignation as the output. Similarly, if someone so organizes his beliefs and the way he makes inferences that he cannot let the presence of a

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid. p193

<sup>36</sup> Ibid. p195

<sup>37</sup> Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (op cit) p217

tree in suitable sunshine suffice to give him confidence that there is a shadow, but needs information about whether people think one way or another, he is in a mess. He will fail to be confident in truths about the actual world when he should be.<sup>38</sup>

Blackburn does, of course, believe that morality is mind dependent in the sense that it would not exist without the minds of human beings, a claim that by itself I have no desire to question. However, what he wants to do is to deny that projectivism implies the unacceptable form of mind dependence that takes the reductionist form of claiming that the content of our propositions is directly about our minds. He thinks that it need imply no such thing and that the projectivist may rightfully conclude that, 'When I say that Hitler was evil or that trees cause shade I am not talking about myself'<sup>39</sup>.

Blackburn's response to MacIntyre is, therefore, that the ultimate truth of projectivism does not mean that the 'surface forms' of our language are mistaken, in fact, if we have earned the right to speak in terms of these surface forms, then why not regard ourselves as having constructed a notion of moral truth?<sup>40</sup> This is why he terms his position quasi-realism. Indeed, as Alexander Miller suggests, it would perhaps be best termed 'ambitious quasi-realism', the position that we actually construct moral truths, in contrast to the 'modest quasi-realism' that claims that we earn the right to speak *as if* these things were the case<sup>41</sup>.

This sounds promising. Indeed, if the claim to ambitious quasi-realism holds true, then we would have an example of non-cognitivism in which choice was not the central feature of our moral lives in the crucial respect required by MacIntyre's critique of emotivism and its relatives. However, no matter how much more sophisticated this

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p218

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p219

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p196

<sup>41</sup> Miller *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (op cit) p77

is than the emotivism of the mid-twentieth century in many other ways, Blackburn's work still shares with this earlier form of non-cognitivism the fatal flaw of being unable to distinguish morality from other forms of approval and commendation. In *Spreading the Word* he states that the ability of a theory to locate what it is about an attitude which makes it a moral one, is one of the things we require from a projectivist account<sup>42</sup>. This is a challenge to which he returns in *Ruling Passions*, where he seems to suggest two different ways in which we can understand our values. The first suggestion is that moral issues are those cases in which we feel ourselves at one with someone's anger and are strongly disposed to encourage others to share it<sup>43</sup>. The second suggestion is that to hold a value is typically:

to have a relatively stable disposition to conduct practical life and practical discussion in a particular way: it is to be disposed or set in that way, and notably to be set against change in this respect.<sup>44</sup>

The problem with both emotional assent and stable dispositions accounts however is that neither can identify what it is to hold a specifically *moral* form of ascent or disposition, as opposed to other forms such as aesthetic approval or disapproval<sup>45</sup>. Blackburn does depict our emotional identifications and demands as an 'ascending staircase' between pure preference, on the one hand, and attitudes with all the flavour of ethical commitment, on the other<sup>46</sup>. However, unless he is to be crude enough to simply judge the moral on some purely quantitative scale of strength of preference, this image is of little help in solving the problem. Earlier we saw MacIntyre dismiss emotivism's claims to be a theory of the meaning of ethical language, because by reducing it to preference, such an account had to give a purely circular account of

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<sup>42</sup> Blackburn *Spreading the Word* (op cit) p189

<sup>43</sup> Blackburn *Ruling Passions* (op cit) p9

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p67

<sup>45</sup> For a fuller discussion see Miller *An Introduction to Contemporary Metaethics* (op cit) pp88-94

<sup>46</sup> Blackburn *Ruling Passion* (op cit) p9

what counted as moral approval, or it had to remain silent<sup>47</sup>. It is this latter option that seems to have triumphed in *Ruling Passions* with Blackburn's statement that it is not profitable to seek a 'strict definition' of the moral attitude and that the problem of definition is nothing more than a problem of the 'polymorphous nature of our emotional and motivational natures themselves', rather than anything that must be resolved by a radically different analysis from his own<sup>48</sup>. However, as we have now seen, we are not simply missing a strict definition from Blackburn, but, in fact, any real definition at all. Without an understanding of how we are to distinguish moral approval from other forms of commendation, Blackburn's theory must also undermine the authority of moral judgments, reducing them to one of the ways in which I can choose to influence others, just as MacIntyre has suggested from 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' onwards.

### 2.3.2 Allan Gibbard and non-cognitivism

Just as with MacIntyre's critique of Hare, Blackburn's attempt to give moral reasoning its due is, therefore, ultimately undermined by his more fundamental commitment to viewing morality as a projection of preferences. However, if things are not looking good for the non-cognitivist so far, there is another route that can be taken, that which has been developed by Allan Gibbard. This is a position that is different enough from Hare or Blackburn to deserve examination in its own right, if MacIntyre's blanket condemnation of non-cognitivism is to have plausibility.

Gibbard suggests that we can understand the term 'morality' broadly to include the question of how to live, or narrowly to cover simply the sentiments of guilt and resentment<sup>49</sup>. It is this narrow sense that dominates Gibbard's discussion, morality as a narrow part of life where we need a set of constraints. Within this context, he argues that moral judgments are not feelings, but rather judgments of what moral feelings it is

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<sup>47</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp12-13

<sup>48</sup> Blackburn *Ruling Passions* (op cit) pp13-14

<sup>49</sup> Allan Gibbard *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings: A Theory of Normative Judgment* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1990) p6

rational to have'<sup>50</sup>. However, in place of either a cognitivist or quasi-realist understanding of what this might mean, he advocates a form of 'norm expressivism', in which to call a thing rational is not to state a matter of fact, but rather to endorse a thing in some way. As he puts it:

Normative life is part of nature, but it does not describe nature. In particular, a person who calls something rational or irrational is not describing his own state of mind; he is expressing it.<sup>51</sup>

The rationality that Gibbard accepts in his account of moral judgments is, therefore, a thoroughly subjectivised one that is completely compatible with non-cognitivism.

On this basis, Gibbard seems to be able to answer the problem of circularity that defeated Blackburn by claiming that specifically moral approbation and disapprobation can be marked out as norms for the rationality of guilt and resentment. Indeed, for Gibbard, human moral nature is essentially about co-ordination 'broadly conceived', a way of regulating our relationships with others and thus of preserving the network of social bonds on which our survival as humans has always depended<sup>52</sup>. Thus, he claims, a blameworthy action is one where it is rational for the agent to feel guilt and for others to resent her<sup>53</sup>.

It could, however, be objected that such a focus on guilt and anger cannot be adequate as an understanding of morality, moreover, this is a point with which Gibbard expresses some sympathy. Thus Gibbard concedes that guilt and anger are 'bleakly negative' and that even morality narrowly construed seems to take in 'positive feelings of moral approbation'<sup>54</sup>. Moreover, he also accepts that a culture may lack guilt

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p6

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. pp7-8

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p26

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. p47

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p51



altogether, or it may play no significant role even if it is present in some form. He even raises the question of whether there could not even be shame based or fear based moralities<sup>55</sup>. Gibbard seems to be comfortable with these thoughts, even to the extent of claiming that the understanding of the moral is really an issue of stipulation, because what morality is really concerned with, on his account, is our norms of social control.

However, it is at this point that MacIntyre's criticism of the 'emotivist' position again becomes relevant since there are many forms of social control and coordination, not all of them moral. One could, for example, imagine agents who co-ordinate with one another without reference to moral notions at all, but who instead react to infractions from others according to a narrow and businesslike focus on instrumental rationality, perhaps in the manner of an iterated prisoner's dilemma. We saw, in the previous chapter, that the younger MacIntyre could reject this possibility and give shape to his account of the moral by appealing to an understanding of morality as safeguarding the means to the satisfaction of our most important and long term desires. However, no such contrast between different forms of rationality is available to Gibbard. His attempt to distinguish morality from other kinds of norms, such as aesthetic norms or norms of impropriety, is achieved by again treating moral norms as norms for guilt and resentment, norms of propriety as 'norms for the rationality of shock' and, most vaguely, aesthetic norms as 'norms for the rationality of kinds of aesthetic appreciation'<sup>56</sup>. However, since he has, only one page previously, conceded that guilt and resentment may not be coextensive with the moral, such an account simply cannot work.

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<sup>55</sup> The challenge that the culture and language of the Greeks did not have an understanding of guilt separate from shame, and that both were included in the concept *aidos*, is argued by Bernard Williams in *Shame and Necessity* (University of California Press 1993) chapter IV. However, on Williams' terminology, this is not a point about the definition of morality but rather concerned with his claim that the narrow and distorting perspective of 'morality' needs to be rejected in favour of a broader understanding of ethical life. See Bernard Williams *Ethics and the Limits of Philosophy* (London, Fontana 1993) Chapter 10. As I stated at the opening of the introduction I employ a broad understanding of 'morality' to cover the concerns of ethical life in general.

<sup>56</sup> Gibbard *Wise Choices, Apt Feelings* (op cit) p52

Gibbard's account of morality therefore fails, and it fails exactly in the manner that MacIntyre's analysis suggests that it would in its attempt to pick out what is distinctive about the moral. This has predictable consequences for the rest of Gibbard's analysis. Thus, as we have seen, MacIntyre is quick to point out that Stevenson's emotivist understanding of what it is to call something 'good', 'I like it; do so as well', undermines the distinction between moral arguments based on reason and other forms of influence. Gibbard seeks to distinguish his account of what he terms the 'conversational demands' that we place on others, from the position of classic emotivism, by stressing that his account is not about mere liking but the acceptance of norms<sup>57</sup>. Indeed, this is how he seeks to answer the objection that non-cognitivism makes moral statements unacceptably mind dependent by arguing (much like Blackburn) that no decent person would accept the norms that presently unacceptable actions would become acceptable just because our tastes changed<sup>58</sup>. He is also keen to stress the distinction between giving reasons and browbeating those with whom we interact:

I as a speaker do not simply demand; I claim to have a basis for my demands. I might browbeat, I might issue demands for which I myself think I have no basis—but that is not the ordinary case. Speakers distinguish browbeating demands from reasonable demands, and in normal conversation a speaker confines himself to demands he thinks reasonable.<sup>59</sup>

The problem is that the argument that he gives for the authority that I have in conversing with others is not convincing. He argues that, if I am to accord no fundamental authority to the judgments of others, then I cannot consistently accord it to my own. The alternative to my acceptance that others may have valid points to

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p173

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p165

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p173

make is, therefore, a form of hyperscepticism<sup>60</sup>. However, the possibility that my ultimate commitment to norms is arbitrary and non-rational, is exactly the situation that MacIntyre argues lies behind the 'defensive and shrill' nature of contemporary moral argument<sup>61</sup>. In short, if we really accepted Gibbard's form of non-cognitivism, we must in our more reflective moments come to recognise the arbitrary nature of our claims on others and thus reinforce the impotence of the moral critic.

## 2.4 Philosophy as effect

The failures of emotivism are, therefore, shared by at least some other forms of non-cognitivism that have more influence in contemporary academic discussion. However, the importance of emotivism for MacIntyre is not a simply function of what he, himself, concedes to be the rather limited reach that academic philosophy has in our culture. Instead, he argues that the true importance of emotivism lies not in its false view of the meaning of moral statements, but in the way in which it reflects and recognises a truth about the way in which people have come to use moral discourse<sup>62</sup>.

As MacIntyre sees it, this truth is first apparent in the emotivist reaction to G. E. Moore's intuitionism. As MacIntyre reminds us, Moore held that the good was indefinable and known only to a special objective faculty<sup>63</sup>. Thus, something either did or did not possess goodness, but in a manner that was not capable of further proof or disproof. However, as J. M. Keynes recounts, with nothing else to appeal to, in practice this meant that victory in ethical debates went to those who were able to 'speak with the greatest appearance of clear, undoubting conviction and could best use the accents of infallibility'<sup>64</sup>. If moral judgment seemed to be reduced to 'Moore's gasps of incredulity and head-shaking', 'Strachey's grim silences' and 'Lowes Dickinson's shrugs', then it would be natural for an observer to generalise that this might be all that it ever

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid. pp177-179

<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p8

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. pp13-14

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p15

<sup>64</sup> Keynes quoted in ibid. p17

really was<sup>65</sup>. Thus MacIntyre observes that those he terms the acutest founders of modern emotivism, such as F. P. Ramsey, Austin Duncan-Jones and C. L. Stevenson, were all pupils of Moore, of whom, it is not too implausible to say, that they 'did in fact confuse moral utterances at Cambridge (and in other places with a similar inheritance) after 1903 with moral utterances as such'<sup>66</sup>.

However, it soon becomes apparent in *After Virtue*, that MacIntyre sees emotivism as a far broader reflection of a society (or at the very least one important aspect of it) rather than simply an error committed by a small group of people who had once met G. E. Moore. This is a world where, if we are to believe the famously apocalyptic opening of *After Virtue*, although we still possess the 'simulacra of morality' we have 'very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality'<sup>67</sup>. It is also one in which the distinction between manipulative and non-manipulative social relations is abolished in practice, whatever claims are made about it in theory. Crucial here is the world of bureaucratic rationality where resources, both human and non-human, are to be manipulated and directed towards predetermined ends<sup>68</sup>. MacIntyre reminds us that this is expressed above all in the work of Max Weber, where all faiths and evaluations are judged to be equally lacking in ultimate rational justification and the contrast between power and authority, although paid lip service to, is effectively obliterated leaving bureaucratic authority nothing more than the exercise of successful power<sup>69</sup>. The truth which emotivism reflects is therefore a social reality present independently of philosophical debates in Cambridge or Bloomsbury. The mistake of the emotivist is the broader one of taking the 'historically produced characteristics of what is specifically modern' for timeless characteristics of all and any moral judgments<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p2

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p35

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p26

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p35

Gordon Graham has suggested that MacIntyre's account of emotivism is, in some sense, compatible with a Marxist account of ideology, that is that the 'emotivist' family of theories, 'reflect and confirm the self-images of the age, but cannot reveal their deficiencies'<sup>71</sup>. This is a useful suggestion, however, it is also one that leads us to a weakness in MacIntyre's account of the origins of such non-cognitivist theories in *After Virtue*, where emotivism is simply treated as reflecting our society in the sense of naively reproducing the way in which moral discourse is used. As I conceded in section 2.2, where Blackburn does have a point, is in reminding us how hierarchical and sexist pre-modern understandings of objective reason could be. I would argue that a significant part of the motivation for the development of non-cognitivist theories is to assert the choice of the individual over any such constraints as to who we are or what we can be. The problem with this is analogous to the position of the former Communist turned moral critic of Stalinism as depicted in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'. Such a character escapes from the Stalinist attempt to subsume the 'ought' of morality to the 'is' of history (and hence subject to the direction of the all knowing Party) only to make moral criticism impotent by detaching 'ought' from anything other than individual will. Similarly, part of the motivation of the emotivist is an attempt to escape from a repressive account of rationality and the place of human beings in the universe, but the emotivists and their successors have fallen back on the idea of arbitrary commitment without any appreciation of its prospect of impotence and manipulation. By only focusing on emotivism as a reflection of moral usage, MacIntyre cannot take account of this. I would also suggest that, in addition, it blinds him to the liberating aspect of modern freedom that he seemed to briefly acknowledge when he wrote in *A Short History of Ethics* that 'the acids of individualism' have eaten into our moral structures over the past four centuries with results that are 'for both good and ill'<sup>72</sup>.

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<sup>71</sup> Gordon Graham 'MacIntyre on history and philosophy' in *Alasdair MacIntyre* edited by Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003) p17

<sup>72</sup> MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (op cit) p257

## 2.5 Philosophy as the cause of the social order

Gordon Graham suggests that there are remarks in *After Virtue* that can be taken as indications that, as well as seeing emotivism as a reflection of our contemporary situation, MacIntyre believes that it is ‘the widespread *belief* in emotivism which has generated much of the difficulty’<sup>73</sup>. As an example of this strand of thought, Graham references MacIntyre’s comments in chapter three of *After Virtue* about the role of ‘characters’, such as the character of ‘the manager’, who define the social possibilities of our lives and who are said to be the social embodiment of ‘moral and metaphysical ideas and theories’<sup>74</sup>. However, to hold to such a position would both be highly implausible and contrary to MacIntyre’s own interpretation of the origins of emotivism in the manner in which people may now ‘think, talk and act *as if* emotivism were true, no matter what their avowed theoretical standpoint may be’<sup>75</sup>. Emotivism, it seems, is ultimately more effect than cause.

However, if in the case of emotivism, prescriptivism and the like the role of philosophy is, according to MacIntyre, to inadvertently hold a mirror to the world rather than to create it, when we turn to examine MacIntyre’s account of the rise of the ‘emotivist’ social order, we have a very different picture in which philosophy is given a quite extraordinary causal role. This becomes very clear when we turn to his most explicit statement of the relationship between philosophy and the wider social order at the beginning of chapter four of *After Virtue*:

What I am going to suggest is that the key episodes in the social history which transformed, fragmented and, if my extreme view is correct, largely displaced morality — and so created the possibility of the emotivist self with its characteristic form of relationship and modes of utterance—were episodes in

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<sup>73</sup> Graham ‘MacIntyre on history and philosophy’ (op cit) p18

<sup>74</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p28 and Graham ‘MacIntyre on history and philosophy’ (op cit) p18

<sup>75</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p22

the history of philosophy, that it is only in the light of that history that we can understand how the idiosyncrasies of everyday contemporary moral discourse came to be and thus how the emotivist self was able to find a means of expression. Yet how can this be so? In our own culture academic philosophy is a highly marginal and specialized activity. Professors of philosophy do from time to time seek to wear the clothes of relevance and some of the college-educated public are haunted by vague cartoon-like memories of Philosophy 100. But both would find it surprising and the larger public even more surprising if it were suggested, as I am now suggesting, that the roots of some of the problems which now engage the specialized attention of academic philosophers and the roots of some of the problems central to our everyday social and practical lives are one and the same. Surprise would only be succeeded by incredulity if it were further suggested that we cannot understand, let alone solve, one of these sets of problems without understanding the other.<sup>76</sup>

It is not, therefore, that philosophy is now central to our social order, it is more that:

... both our general culture and our academic philosophy are in central part the offspring of a culture in which philosophy did constitute a central form of social activity, in which its role and function was very unlike that which it has with us. It was, so I shall argue, the failure of that culture to solve its problems, problems at once practical and philosophical, which was *a* and perhaps *the* key factor in determining the form both of our academic philosophical problems and of our practical social problems.<sup>77</sup>

As we saw at the start of this chapter, it is possible (whatever his intention at the time might have been) to treat MacIntyre's brief account of the development of moral discourse in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' as embodying a claim for

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid. p36

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

locating the origins of the disorder of contemporary moral discourse in the Reformation, an idea that is, however, not supported by MacIntyre's own stated commitment in that work for a sophisticated understanding of the relationship between theory and the broader social reality. In contrast, *After Virtue* seems to be quite explicit that it was theoretical developments, in particular the failure of an earlier culture to resolve its philosophical problems, which led to our current predicament.

To see what this could mean, we need to observe that, for MacIntyre, our moral discourse begins to be used in the emotivist manner once it loses its connection with the idea of a human telos. This teleological notion gives us the distinction between *man-as-he-happens-to-be* and *man-as-he-could-be-if-he-realized-his-essential-nature*, with ethics as the science that enables human beings to understand how they can make the transition from the former to the latter<sup>78</sup>. This is a scheme in which we need virtues to help us to order our desires and achieve the good of rational happiness that can be achieved with the fulfilment of our telos. It finds its classic exposition in the works of Aristotle but, MacIntyre believes, it continues to be embodied even in the Calvinist and Jansenist perspectives that rejected Aristotle by stressing the depravity of human nature and the inability of human reason to lead us to our good. This, he claims, is because in this context moral discourse still retains a distinction between our untutored state and our telos, even if it is the divine moral law and not human reason that is to act as 'schoolmaster' and it is the power of grace rather than human effort that will enable us to follow it<sup>79</sup>.

Where the predecessor culture went wrong, was its inability to maintain the idea of the human telos. As MacIntyre makes clear in *After Virtue*, the idea of a telos could not survive the secular rejection of Protestant and Catholic theology and the scientific and philosophical rejection of Aristotelianism which banished any notion of a

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid p52

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. pp53-54



human final cause<sup>80</sup>. Stripped of both divine law and Aristotle's 'metaphysical biology'<sup>81</sup>, the moral philosophers of the Enlightenment and their successors were presented with a set of remaining elements whose relationship had become quite unclear. Attempts to understand morality on the basis of these remaining elements in such diverse writers as Kant, Hume, Diderot, Smith or Kierkegaard were, he believes, predestined to fail<sup>82</sup>. It is also for this reason that MacIntyre believes that the attempts of cognitivist analytic moral philosophers to ground morality in an account of rationality must also fail<sup>83</sup>.

## 2.6 Materialism and idealism

The claim that developments in philosophy, in some crucial respect, created the modern world is a difficult and controversial claim to maintain. Gordon Graham suggests that MacIntyre's account of eighteenth century Scottish society in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* provides us with a useful opportunity to evaluate the broader claims that he seeks to make about social consciousness and material reality given that, in contrast to our own society, philosophy really did play an important role in the education of its professional class<sup>84</sup>. The key point is that MacIntyre ends up telling the story of transition from a social order favourable to the virtues to the Anglicised market oriented society in terms of the adequacy of ideas of the old order's defenders. So, as he tells the story, Francis Hutcheson's attempt to defend the existing order was ultimately undermined by its own internal and inherent weaknesses<sup>85</sup>. Graham, however, reminds us that there is a less elevated idea to consider, namely that:

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid. p54

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p58

<sup>82</sup> Ibid. chapter 5

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p21

<sup>84</sup> Gordon Graham 'MacIntyre on history and philosophy' (op cit) p21

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p22

However elegant and intellectually sophisticated such accounts may have been, it is quite possible that the temper of the times first endorsed them with relatively little understanding, and then cast them aside in prejudice and ignorance. To do so was irrational of course, if they really did have the intellectual strengths he alleges, but would have been no less effective for this irrationality. It is, in my view; an intellectualist prejudice to suppose that only coherent ideas can work, or endure, in the end. Unreason may be as powerful, sometimes more so, than rationality.<sup>86</sup>

After all, Graham also observes, MacIntyre himself seems to believe that Thomism was defeated by the power of the institutionalised curriculum that could find no room for the Aristotelian system rather than any intellectual inadequacy in Aquinas's ideas<sup>87</sup>.

MacIntyre may, therefore, have developed an explanation for the rise of the emotivist society that is missing from his earlier work, but it is no more convincing than the mirror image that one can find in the crude Marxist account that seeks to explain the ideology of individualism as a simple reflection of the interests of a rising class of entrepreneurs 'chafing under restrictions of just that medieval communalism which subordinated these interests to the older hierarchical order'<sup>88</sup>. However, as Mark Wartofsky observes, in his response to *After Virtue*, it is, of course, possible to give a more subtle Marxist analysis in which features of ideology, philosophy, religious and moral belief enter, 'not simply as epiphenomena of material or economic class interests, but as social causes of the very development of these interests themselves'<sup>89</sup>.

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p23

<sup>87</sup> See ibid p23 and Alasdair MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London, Duckworth 1990) p51

<sup>88</sup> Mark W. Wartofsky 'Virtue Lost or Understanding MacIntyre' in *Inquiry*, volume 27 (1984) p244

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p245

MacIntyre's response to Wartofsky is to suggest that even a sophisticated form of Marxism must fall into the error of supposing that we can identify 'economic or social factors independently from ideological or theoretical factors in such a way as to produce causal explanation of a cogent kind'<sup>90</sup>. This is a charge that he repeats in 'Three Perspectives on Marxism' in his critique of the 'bürgerlich' distortion in the thought of Marx and Engels. This, he suggests, can be found in their treatment of the economic, the political, and the ideological:

as distinct and separate, albeit causally interrelated areas of human activity, a treatment whose effect was to transform contingent characteristics of mid- and late nineteenth-century capitalist societies into analytical categories purporting to provide the key to human history and social structure in general.<sup>91</sup>

This conclusion is, however, puzzling in the light of MacIntyre's own earlier explanation of Marx's account of base and superstructure, although, as we will see in section 5.2, it does have something in common with Thompson's account in the 'Poverty of Theory' of how Marx's work after *The German Ideology* became trapped within the categories of political economy<sup>92</sup>. In 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' MacIntyre is clear that, although Stalinism offers a mechanical conception of the relation between base and superstructure, Marx's own account is not only not mechanical, but also not even causal. Instead, he seems to be suggesting that we view each element through a theory of internal relations, that is, as Bertell Ollman puts it, we take them to be containing in themselves 'as integral elements of what they are, those parts with which we tend to see them externally tied'<sup>93</sup>. To return to the passage that we encountered in the chapter one, he argues that, although Marx talks

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<sup>90</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'After Virtue and Marxism: A Response to Wartofsky' in *Inquiry*, 27, p253

<sup>91</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Three Perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995' in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006) p152

<sup>92</sup> E. P. Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors' in *The Poverty of Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p60

<sup>93</sup> Bertell Ollman *Alienation: Marx's Conception of Man in Capitalist Society* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1971) p15

of the base ‘determining’ the ‘superstructure and a ‘correspondence’ existing between them:

the reader of Hegel’s *Logic* will realise that what Marx envisages is something to be understood in terms of the way in which the nature of the concept of a given class, for example, may determine the concept of membership of that class. What the economic basis, the mode of production, does is to provide a framework within which superstructure arises, a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, a kernel of human relationship from which all else grows<sup>94</sup>.

Nowhere does MacIntyre adequately come to terms with the alternative that he himself had earlier suggested, a fact that becomes even stranger, if we take seriously Peter McMylor’s suggestion that MacIntyre’s later work is ‘an attempt to salvage, in a revised philosophic mould, much of the methodological substance of the Hegelian-Marxist theory of internal relations’<sup>95</sup>.

Furthermore, MacIntyre’s critique of Marxism not only fails to take account of his own earlier contributions to understanding base and superstructure, it also demonstrates a fairly basic misunderstanding of the nature of historical materialism. In a footnote in *Capital* (the same footnote incidentally from which MacIntyre takes the observation about Don Quixote that he quotes at the start of ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’) Marx raises the possible objection that, although material interests may be preponderant in nineteenth century capitalist societies, life in the Middle Ages was, on the contrary, dominated by Catholicism, just as the classical world was by politics. Marx’s response is that whatever else we might say, one thing, at least, is clear:

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<sup>94</sup> MacIntyre ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’ (op cit) pp54-55

<sup>95</sup> Peter McMylor *Alasdair MacIntyre: Critic of Modernity* (London, Routledge 1994) p190

the Middle Ages could not live on Catholicism, nor could the ancient world on politics. On the contrary, it is the manner in which they gained their livelihood which explains why in one case politics, in the other case Catholicism, played the chief part.<sup>96</sup>

As Alex Callinicos suggests, to grasp this point we need to recognise a sharp distinction 'between the vocabulary used to characterise a social formation's form of articulation, its institutional organisation, and the theoretical concepts of historical materialism'<sup>97</sup>. To take feudal society as an example, here we have a situation in which the peasant producer remains the possessor of the means of production, leaving the ruling class no option than to extract surplus labour by extra-economic means<sup>98</sup>. This form of exploitation, in its turn, provides the basis for distinctively feudal forms of political competition which may possess a different logic to that which dictates the struggles set in motion by competitive capital accumulation. Thus Callinicos concludes, far from imposing the structure of the capitalist mode of production on pre-capitalist social formations:

historical materialism provides a general explanation of why the analytical distinction between base and superstructure should not correspond to distinct sets of economic and non-economic institutions in these societies.<sup>99</sup>

A critique of historical materialism must show that the distinctive institutional forms we encounter in history cannot adequately be explained on a materialist basis, however, this is a task that MacIntyre fails to even attempt. The additional question of whether, or in what manner, Catholicism really did play a 'chief part' in feudal order is,

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<sup>96</sup> Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume 1* translated by Ben Fowkes (London, Penguin 1976) p176

<sup>97</sup> Alex Callinicos *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* (Leiden, Brill 2004) p200

<sup>98</sup> Ibid. p203

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p204

of course, also one which must be subjected to the case of Abercrombie et al, something that I will examine in the next chapter.

## 2.7 Polanyi as an alternative to Marx

Wartofsky suggests to MacIntyre that, if one is to reject both variants of Marxism, the only option left is to adopt the kind of Weberian account in which ideas are taken to play the dominant role in the explanation of social change, as they arguably do in Weber's own account of the role of Protestantism in the rise of capitalist society<sup>100</sup>. However, in his response to Wartofsky, MacIntyre is clear that such a Weberian analysis would only end up embodying the same error that he diagnoses in Marxism, namely, 'the error of supposing that we can identify economic or social factors independently from ideological or theoretical factors and in such a way produce causal explanation of a cogent kind'<sup>101</sup>.

MacIntyre, therefore, maintains that his goal is to give an analysis that is neither materialist nor idealist, but in which agents' and participants' understanding of social and economic activity, 'is integral to and partially constitutive of the characteristics of such activities that we provide characterizations which enable us to write rationally defensible explanatory narratives'<sup>102</sup>. MacIntyre does not, therefore, see the claims that he makes for philosophy as an exercise in idealism, but rather, as arising as part of an account that is capable of giving an integrated account of social relationships.

The alternative model that MacIntyre advances for such an understanding is the work of Karl Polanyi in *The Great Transformation*<sup>103</sup>. Given the commitment of both MacIntyre and Polanyi to refuting the notion that the instrumentally rational

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<sup>100</sup> Wartofsky 'Virtue Lost or Understanding MacIntyre' (op cit) p245

<sup>101</sup> MacIntyre 'A Response to Wartofsky' (op cit) p253

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p254

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p253

‘economic man’ is a timeless portrayal of human nature and their emphasis on the historically novel and self-destructive nature of liberal modernity, MacIntyre’s endorsement of Polanyi’s work should not come as a surprise<sup>104</sup>. In response to Wartofsky, MacIntyre also gives an important methodological endorsement of Polanyi’s work, suggesting that it avoids the error of supposing that we can identify economic or social factors independently from ideological or theoretical factors in such a way produce causal explanation of a cogent kind that he diagnoses in Marxist and Weberian approaches<sup>105</sup>. Thus he holds that Polanyi’s work is indebted to Marx, whilst, at the same time, abandoning what is unsustainable about the latter’s theoretical framework<sup>106</sup>.

The first problem we face in getting to grips with MacIntyre’s endorsement of Polanyi is the existence of several distinct strands of thought at work in *The Great Transformation*, not all of which are equally congenial to what MacIntyre wants to argue. The main emphasis of the book is undoubtedly on the development of a calculating individualist account of human nature in the work of Adam Smith and the political economists and of its ideologically driven imposition on society by a political elite in the nineteenth century. It is, thus, a story in which the ‘Tory socialism’<sup>107</sup> of subsidising the wages of the poor up to the level of subsistence during the ‘Speenhamland’ era is withdrawn and a whole hearted attempt is made to subject society to a free market in labour, land and money<sup>108</sup>. However, there is also an alternative strand of thought that treats the origins of market society in terms of technological determinism rather than in the realm of theoretical developments. For example, Polanyi at one point suggests that:

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<sup>104</sup> The truly self-regulating market would, Polanyi’s suggests, lead to the ‘demolition of society’ – see Karl Polanyi *The Great Transformation* (Boston, Beacon Press 1957) p73. For Polanyi’s account of the novelty of the self-regulating market see *ibid.* chapter 4.

<sup>105</sup> MacIntyre ‘*After Virtue* and Marxism: A Response to Wartofsky’ (op cit) p253

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.* p254

<sup>107</sup> See Polanyi *The Great Transformation* (op cit) pp96-97

<sup>108</sup> See *ibid.* chapter 6 ‘The Self-Regulating Market and the Fictitious Commodities: Labor, Land, and Money’.

the gearing of markets into a self regulating system of tremendous power was not the result of any inherent tendency of markets towards excrescence, but rather the effect of highly artificial stimulants administered to the body social in order to meet a situation which was created by the no less artificial phenomenon of the machine<sup>109</sup>.

As Gareth Dale explains, the suggestion that is being given here, is that expensive equipment was not profitable unless continuously churning out goods: therefore, once introduced, the cost structure of this technology dictated the commodification of all the factors of production including the labour of human beings<sup>110</sup>. It is, ironically, a claim that Polanyi repeats in a 1947 article where he expresses his opposition to economic determinism<sup>111</sup>. It is also exactly the sort of analysis that MacIntyre believes himself to be rejecting through his endorsement of Polanyi.

However, even if we simply pass over the theme of technological determinism in the rise of individualist market society, the relationship of MacIntyre to Polanyi's work is still far from unproblematic. The problem is that Polanyi presents what Dale describes as two different 'terminologically and conceptually distinct narratives' of the timescale of the rise of market society<sup>112</sup>, narratives which, we can add, have their own implications for how we understand the nature of this transition. One of his narratives bears a strong resemblance to standard accounts of the rise of capitalism, drawing especially upon the work of Belgian historian Henri Pirenne to sketch, what Dale summarises as, 'the gradual but inexorable development of markets in feudal and mercantilist England' commencing as early as the fourteenth century and developing, through Tudor 'agricultural capitalism' and the freeing of trade from local boundaries

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid. p57 also see pp40-41

<sup>110</sup> Gareth Dale *Karl Polanyi: The Limits of the Market* (Cambridge, Polity Press 2010) p52

<sup>111</sup> Ibid. p53

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p50



under mercantilism, to a complete breakthrough in nineteenth century England<sup>113</sup>. The other, contradictory, narrative that Dale terms 'quintessentially Polanyian', stresses that the subordination ('embeddedness') of markets to the broader society is, in essence, maintained throughout mercantilism. The coming of the self-regulating market in the nineteenth century, therefore, represents a sudden and completely unprecedented rupture with all that had gone before, one whose origins can be found in the ideology of the political economists<sup>114</sup>.

By giving a crucial role to theory in bringing market society into being, it is this second narrative that seems closest to MacIntyre's claims about the origins of the modern order at the start of chapter 4 of *After Virtue*. However, as we have now seen, it is not Smith, Ricardo or Malthus who are the main culprits for MacIntyre, but, rather, the late medieval and early modern philosophers who undermined the teleological account of human life. It is for this reason that MacIntyre's account is incompatible with the second Polanyian account of the development of individualist society with its emphasis on the late eighteenth / early nineteenth century. As MacIntyre makes clear in his response to Wartofsky:

There is a sharp contrast between the self-aggrandizing drive for power and money in the European communities of the twelfth and even the thirteenth century and that drive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, a contrast signalled by the different ways in which the relationship of the self to what it possesses is conceptualized. The self comes to acquire the status of 'the individual'; the individual becomes defined as that which is capable of making contracts; anything in the self's environment becomes potentially the property of some individual, so that anything at all — land, money, labour — may be treated as property; property, being the subject-matter of contracts, becomes envisaged in terms of commodities; it so becomes possible to think of any

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid. p51

<sup>114</sup> Ibid. see also p81 for a restatement of the contradiction between the two themes.

human subject-matter in economic terms; land, money and labour themselves all become commodities.<sup>115</sup>

Given the weight of evidence that supports a far longer process of development in market relationships in English history, MacIntyre is, at least, coming out broadly on the right side of the historical evidence<sup>116</sup>. However, it is also difficult to see what is left of a distinctively Polanyian methodology for MacIntyre to endorse in preference to the other explanations, Marxist and otherwise, that have been emerged in response to the developments of this era. In the absence of any kind of developed account of the origins of the present social order, it is also very difficult to see how MacIntyre can justify what he says about the role of philosophy without endorsing a very unconvincing form of idealism.

I therefore conclude this section by restating that just as MacIntyre has failed to relate philosophy to broader social developments in his later work, he has also failed to dismiss the possibility that a sophisticated Marxism inspired by his own early writings could not attempt to do a lot better.

## 2.8 Conclusion

The arbitrary and unconditional choice of the individual is a central theme of modernity and MacIntyre is right to draw our attention to its significance when it comes to moral theorising and the broader context of social relationships of which that theorising is one expression. As theorised by emotivists, choice, as an exercise of pure will, introduces an arbitrariness into moral commitments that fatally undermines the intelligibility of distinctively moral statements and threatens to make them impotent private complaints from the powerless, or forms of manipulation from the powerful. We have now also seen that the charge that this arbitrariness extends well beyond the confines of 'emotivism' proper, a charge that is inherent in MacIntyre's more general

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<sup>115</sup> MacIntyre 'A Response to Wartofsky' (op cit) p253

<sup>116</sup> See for example Dale *Karl Polanyi* (op cit) pp80-84

talk of 'liberal' morality in his earlier work, can be sustained. Despite their more serious attempts to get to grips with the surface forms of moral discourse than was attempted by the emotivists, the analysis of both Blackburn and Gibbard falls down exactly in the manner that MacIntyre says that it must.

This is not, however, to deny that the freedom sought by 'liberal modernity' is not an understandable reaction to the oppressive nature of the social conditions and appeals to a hierarchical reason that preceded it and that MacIntyre was not right, in *A Short History of Ethics*, to see both positive and negative aspects to 'the acids of individualism' that have been at work<sup>117</sup>. One could even go so far as to say that any attempt to improve upon the emotivist family of moral theories must not compromise what is valid in the distinctively modern conception of freedom. In order to show that this might be possible, I try to show, in chapter 6, that the Marxist humanist project of linking morality with desire can be achieved whilst allowing for reasonable pluralism.

Returning, finally, to the second half of this chapter, I can also conclude by saying that, if MacIntyre noted a striking correspondence between moral philosophy and social relationships in his earlier work, he also failed to go further in investigating how this relationship works. When he returns to this theme in *After Virtue* and *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* his attempts to relate the moral to its sociological context is undermined by a dominant narrative in which the whole focus is on theoretical developments, such as the early modern rejection of Aristotelian teleology, over any serious account of the development of the institutions and relationships of capitalist society. This is not, of course, to deny that MacIntyre is right to suggest that the rejection of Aristotelian teleology was part of the creation of a new world, but it needs to be considered as part of a broader totality. In contrast to MacIntyre's exaggerated claims about the centrality of philosophy, is Marx's suggestion, in his preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, that the 'legal, political, aesthetic, or philosophic' constitute an ideological arena in which human beings can become conscious of

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<sup>117</sup> MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (op cit) p257

broader economic and material conflicts and to ‘fight it out’<sup>118</sup>. If we take the priority of the economic and material in a crude Marxist sense, then this claim is itself implausible, the mirror image of MacIntyre’s privileging of theory. Understood, as he himself suggests in ‘Notes from the Moral Wilderness’, it offers the possibility of seeing theoretical and moral discourse as an attempt to get to grips with the contradictions in the world that we inhabit and to so to be able to change it. This, for example, is the project of the ‘social history of political theory’ that Ellen Meiksins Wood attempts to pursue in her recent accounts of the development of Western political thought<sup>119</sup>. Here the development of political ideas is not simply ‘read off’ from a thinker’s social class but rather proper consideration is given to the thinker as an agent engaged in a broader social reality, one which includes ‘social pressures and tensions that shape human interactions outside the political arena and beyond the world of texts’.<sup>120</sup> The failure to engage in any kind of similar project is a major weakness of MacIntyre’s later thought.

The development of ideas in the heads of human beings is not a self-sufficient process, but neither are our ideas simply epiphenomena of no further significance – although it is fair to say that many of the products of contemporary academic philosophy come pretty close to achieving the latter status. The key point, I believe, is that the material conditions and contradictions of the capitalist stage of social organisation present choices that need to be thought through and evaluated. This is why socialist theory requires a humanist dimension even if it is to draw on the resources of Marx, or so I shall argue in chapter 5. However, before I come to this, we need to see in what other ways MacIntyre’s work, from *After Virtue* onwards, might be said to provide answers to the questions that we saw raised in chapter 1.

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<sup>118</sup> Karl Marx Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) pp389-390

<sup>119</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London, Verso 2008). See also Ellen Meiksins Wood *Liberty and Property: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Renaissance to Enlightenment* (London, Verso 2012)

<sup>120</sup> Wood *Citizens to Lords* (op cit) p12





## Chapter 3

### **Can a revolutionary Aristotelianism be built from MacIntyre's account of practices, narratives and traditions?**

MacIntyre's abandonment of Marxism did not mark a shift to the right of any conventional kind and in the later work, for which he is now best known, he has continued to seek out resources for resistance to capitalist modernity. Central to this has been the account of practices, narratives and traditions that he first set out in *After Virtue* and which he continued to develop in the major works that followed it. This is an account in which, in contrast to his earlier Marxist work, Aristotle has come centre stage, either in his own right or through Thomas Aquinas's appropriation of his work. It is also a development that has been termed 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' by Kelvin Knight, a term that was later endorsed by MacIntyre himself<sup>1</sup>. As Knight puts it, this perspective constitutes MacIntyre's politics, his view of how philosophy should subject the exercise of power to critical scrutiny and which should inform collective action<sup>2</sup>. Knight even holds out the hope that MacIntyre's account of practices may contribute 'legitimation and coordination' to the struggle and so transform previously isolated struggles into 'a new class war of attrition'<sup>3</sup>. My aim in this chapter is to examine the alternative to Marxism that MacIntyre has offered us. I will argue that, far from constituting a revolutionary account, it, in fact, embodies a debilitating form of

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<sup>1</sup> Kelvin Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in *Contemporary Political Studies 1996 Volume 2* edited by Iain Hampshire-Monk and Jeffrey Stanyer (The Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom 1996). For an example of MacIntyre's own adoption of this term see Alasdair MacIntyre 'How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance and Utopia' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011)

<sup>2</sup> Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' (op cit) p885

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. p896

pessimism and at best an ethics of drawn out and marginalised resistance that seeks to outlast the current order but by itself to threaten its overthrow.

I begin, in section 3.1, by outlining MacIntyre's account of what he terms 'practices' which provide the basis for an account of the good contrary to the dominant capitalist logic of instrumental rationality in pursuit of such external goods as wealth and power. In section 3.2, we will see that from the perspective of MacIntyre's later work, such as *The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken*, proletarianisation undermines the conditions required by the practices and virtues necessary for resistance. In response, I will argue that the kind of case that he sets out is simply not plausible in the light of fairly obvious counter examples that he has done nothing to refute. What we can say with certainty is that the conditions under which socialists and trade unionists have developed resistance do exhibit the kind of contradictory consciousness that runs counter to tradition based rationality as MacIntyre has come to understand in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

However, if for the later MacIntyre the forms of working class life and organisation are not to provide an ordering to our lives and our engagement with practices, then what did he believe could take their place? In section 3.3 I look at MacIntyre's attempt in *After Virtue* to supply this through an account of narratives and traditions, an attempt that fails, by itself, to provide an alternative to the arbitrary choice of rival perspectives that he faced at the end of *A Short History of Ethics*. This leads, in section 3.4, to an examination of MacIntyre's further development of the idea of a tradition in terms of a 'problematic' from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* onwards, an account that finds its ultimate expression in the work of St. Thomas Aquinas. I complete my examination of this position, in section 3.5, by looking at how MacIntyre uses this account of tradition to respond to the claims of relativism, perspectivism and conservatism.



As I will suggest in section 3.6, the problem with this account is that it locates the resources of rational criticism in forms of tradition that MacIntyre himself believes to have been pushed to the margins of the modern social order. MacIntyre, therefore, has little to say to the majority who live 'betwixt and between' traditions as he understands them. I will then go on, in 3.7, to consider the accusation that MacIntyre is even wrong to assume that pre-capitalist societies embodied the forms of shared values and traditions that he assumes in his discussion of such figures as Thomas Aquinas. I will argue that such evidence as we have does indeed cast a long shadow over MacIntyre's claims about the subversive nature of Aquinas' thought.

In short, this examination of MacIntyre's account of practices and traditions will conclude that it fails to be either a *revolutionary* Aristotelianism or even an Aristotelianism of sustained and wide scale forms of resistance, and must instead succumb to a rather crushing pessimism that leaves a great many people in the kind of moral wilderness that constitutes the dead end which his thought had reached in *A Short History of Ethics* (see 1.6 above). Moreover, in the light of 3.2, I will claim that it is the theory of conceptual schemes, rather than sociology, that remains as the underpinning for his insistence on a politics based upon 'local' communities and its subsequent pessimism.

### 3.1 Practices and institutions

*After Virtue* memorably begins with MacIntyre's 'disquieting suggestion' that the state of moral discourse in our society resembles a fictional scenario in which the intelligibility of scientific language has been shattered. The catastrophe that MacIntyre describes is one in which the general public has blamed a series of environmental disasters on scientists resulting in widespread riots, the burning down of scientific laboratories, the lynching of physicists and the destruction of scientific books and instruments. Finally, the rise to power of a 'Know Nothing' political movement completes this process, leaving a situation where the remaining scraps of scientific

knowledge are so fragmented and lacking in context, that genuine science is impossible for future generations whose 'science' becomes a matter of subjectively asserting aspects of the surviving fragments<sup>4</sup>. MacIntyre's point is that, in the actual world which we inhabit, the language of morality is in 'the same state of grave disorder' as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which he has described<sup>5</sup>. Ours is a world that still possesses the 'simulacra of morality' but in which we have 'very largely, if not entirely – lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, or morality'<sup>6</sup>.

This is, therefore, a world in which the 'moral wilderness' referenced in his earlier Marxist work still has centre place, a world whose supposed 'emotivist' culture and its origins was the topic of the previous chapter. What I am interested in here is how, in contrast to MacIntyre's acceptance of arbitrary choice in ethical perspectives in *A Short History of Ethics* in the wake of his break with Marxism, he goes on to outline an account of 'practices' whose continued existence runs counter to the forms of instrumental reasoning that he believes dominate capitalist modernity. The range of such practices is wide and encompasses arts, sciences, games and politics (in the Aristotelian sense of creating and sustaining human communities) as well as family life. A practice is constituted by:

any coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity through which goods internal to that form of activity are realised in the course of trying to achieve those standards of excellence which are appropriate to, and partially definitive of, that form of activity, with the result that human powers to achieve excellence, and human conceptions of the ends and goods involved, are systematically extended.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) pp1-2

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p2

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. p187

Practices therefore form the context in which particular kinds of goods can be pursued. Indeed, the key distinction between internal and external goods is that these practices offer us goods that cannot be achieved in any other way. For example, MacIntyre asks us to imagine a child who agrees to learn to play chess in return for candy, with more candy on offer if the child wins a game with the adult. If the external motivation of candy remains the only good pursued by the child, he or she will have no incentive not to cheat if an opportunity to do so presents itself. However if, as the adult hopes, the child comes to love chess for itself for the opportunities it offers for 'a certain highly particular kind of analytical skill, strategic imagination and competitive intensity' then, by cheating, the child will only defeat him or herself<sup>8</sup>.

MacIntyre's practices therefore embody standards of excellence and obedience to rules in a manner that excludes subjectivist and emotivist analyses of judgment. This is because MacIntyre is arguing that once I enter into a practice, I am no longer judged solely by my own assessment of my performance, instead my own 'attitudes, choices, preferences and tastes' must be subordinated to the standards that currently define practices. It is not that the historically evolving standards are immune from criticism, but rather, that such criticism must be a development of some kind of the standards that have so far been established. Thus, to use MacIntyre's own example, 'if, on starting to play baseball, I do not accept that others know better than I when to throw a fast ball and when not, I will never learn to appreciate good pitching let alone to pitch'<sup>9</sup>.

Practices also embody virtues as well as rules. A virtue, as MacIntyre understands it, is an acquired human quality which enables us to achieve those goods that are internal to a practice and the lack of which prevents us from doing so<sup>10</sup>. Thus,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p188

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p190

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p191

in order to achieve the goods that can only be achieved by subordinating ourselves to practices:

we have to be prepared to take whatever self-endangering risks are demanded along the way; and we have to listen carefully to what we are told about our own inadequacies and to reply with the same carefulness for the facts. In other words we have to accept as necessary components of any practice with internal goods and standards of excellence the virtues of justice, courage and honesty.<sup>11</sup>

What different schemes of virtues require of us may, MacIntyre suggests, differ considerably in different cultures, thus Lutheran pietists had a very different attitude towards telling the truth than Bantu parents who told their children to lie to strangers to protect them from witchcraft<sup>12</sup>. However, despite such variation in the kinds of societies in which the practices might flourish, 'what they could not do is flourish in societies in which the virtues were not valued'<sup>13</sup>.

However, not only do practices with their rules and virtues constitute an important aspect of our pursuit of our individual good, they also suggest ways in which this individual good can be reconciled with the good of others. In the case of external goods, the more of the good that one person has the less there is for others. This, MacIntyre suggests, is necessarily the case with power and fame and sometimes contingently the case as with money. In contrast to external goods with their losers and winners:

Internal goods are indeed the outcome of competition to excel, but it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice. So when Turner transformed the

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp192-193

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p193

seascape painting or W. G. Grace advanced the art of batting in cricket in a quite new way their achievement enriched the whole relevant community.<sup>14</sup>

Practices therefore embody their own standards of excellence and rationality that run counter to any narrow focus on the competition for external goods and the logic of possessive individualism. They are not a zero-sum game.

Thus the continued existence of practices seems to suggest a basis for hope because it gives us an alternative to instrumental rationality that undercuts the apocalyptic tone of the opening of *After Virtue*. However, a deep vein of pessimism is still apparent in MacIntyre's own presentation of the possibilities for the construction of such an alternative logic. As his argument appears in *After Virtue*, the position of practices is under threat, primarily due to their reliance on institutions. MacIntyre suggests that no practice can survive for long without institutions, indeed he suggests that practices and institutions form 'a single causal order'<sup>15</sup>. However, these institutions, such as chess clubs, laboratories, universities and hospitals, are 'characteristically and necessarily' concerned with external goods such as money, power, status and so forth. Thus:

the ideals and the creativity of the practice are always vulnerable to the acquisitiveness of the institution, in which the cooperative care for common goods of the practice is always vulnerable to the competitiveness of the institution.<sup>16</sup>

Without the virtues of justice, courage and truthfulness practices could not resist the corrupting power of institutions<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid. pp190-191

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p194

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p194

However, if MacIntyre believes that the relationship between practices and institutions will always be problematic and will always require the cultivation of the virtues, he also believes that in the social order we inhabit it is institutions and external goods that have the upper hand. Thus it is the figure of the bureaucratic manager who MacIntyre takes to be one of the definitive ‘characters’ of the contemporary order, a character whose role is justified through an appeal to effectiveness in the exercise of institutional power (including effectiveness in manipulating others) rather than the furthering of the goods internal to relevant practices<sup>18</sup>. This can be starkly illustrated if we consider the rise of managerial and bureaucratic control in the form of the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and the overall ‘audit culture’ within British universities that has arisen since the publication of *After Virtue*. Inspired by the ‘Balanced Scorecard’ and ‘Key Performance Indicators’ methods of American business schools such developments represent what Simon Head describes as ‘a bureaucracy of command and control that links the UK Treasury, at the top, all the way down to the scholars at the base’. The results of this system are summarised by one (unnamed) historian quoted by Head in terms that highlight all of MacIntyre’s fears about the subordination of practices to institutions:

The bureaucratization of scholarship in the humanities is simply spirit-crushing. I may prepare an article on extremism, my research area, for publication in a learned journal, and my RAE line manager focuses immediately on the influence of the journal, the number of citations of my text, the amount of pages written, or the journal’s publisher. Interference by these academic managers is pervasive and creeping. Whether my article is any good, or advances scholarship in the field, are quickly becoming secondary issues.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp26-28

<sup>19</sup> Simon Head ‘The Grim Threat to British Universities’ in *The New York Review of Books* (13<sup>th</sup> January 2011)

Such accounts of the subversion of practices by institutions could, of course, be found in the age of neo-liberalism throughout the public services. Commenting on the RAE, MacIntyre observes that academic hierarchies are now bureaucratic hierarchies, a situation in which resistance is muted by the lack of an adequate rival conception of how academic teaching and enquiry should be evaluated<sup>20</sup>. Instrumental bureaucratic rationality thus flourishes in the absence of any credible basis for a broader account of value rationality.

Finally, we can also note that, even though by the time that MacIntyre came to write *After Virtue* he had rejected the identification of morality with the education of desire, by itself, there is nothing in the idea of either practices or internal goods and the issues that they face within institutions that is incompatible with the perspective of 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' and its hope that the experience of solidarity in struggle could educate desire and lead people to realise that the goods they truly desired were those that they could have in common with others. The same could, I believe, be said of the contrast between the goods of effectiveness (which concern themselves with the desires I happen to have) and the goods of excellence (that allow that there may be standards of the good of which I may not at the outset have a proper conception) that replaces the internal / external goods distinction in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality*<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, the account of practices so far elaborated could still be used in the further development of a sophisticated understanding of desire, just as much as they could be used to develop the account of tradition based rationality that we will see MacIntyre develop from 3.3 onwards. As we will now see, the suggestion that we include practices in something like his earlier project for socialist humanism is something that the later MacIntyre would reject, in part, because of his views on the place of rationality within a conceptual scheme and in part because of his critique of the effects of proletarianisation.

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<sup>20</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Where we were, where we are, where we need to be' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p328

<sup>21</sup> See MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) pp44-45

### 3.2 Proletarianisation and the moral wilderness

The link between rationality and community is therefore central to MacIntyre's account of traditions just as it was in a very different way in his earlier Marxist humanism. As we saw in chapter one, MacIntyre's 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' suggests that the form of life in which our desires can be educated and an alternative rationality to capitalism can be found in the experience of 'human equality and unity that is bred in industrial working-class life'<sup>22</sup>. Despite their differences the early and later perspectives share a commitment to the perspective of Marx's third thesis on Feuerbach, in which people cannot be treated as a passive mass that must be changed by others but must instead find a way to educate themselves. The later perspective however represents a continuation of the conclusion that MacIntyre was beginning to come to during his time in the International Socialists in the first half of the 1960s, that working class life would not give people the opportunities to develop forms of solidarity and community that run counter to capitalism. By the time of *After Virtue* and the works that followed it, this is based less on an assertion that capitalism has been stabilised by 'conscious, intelligent innovation' than (in part at least) by the manner in which the bureaucratic power of the manager robs people of the autonomous sphere that they need in order to engage with practices in a manner that can allow this process to take place.

For example, in his 1994 essay '*The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken*' MacIntyre asks how we can transcend the perspective of civil society with its relationships of 'utility, of contract and of individual rights'<sup>23</sup> and suggests that this was achieved by groups like the hand-loom weavers of Lancashire and Yorkshire in the late

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<sup>22</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Essays and Articles, 1953–1974* edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008) p65

<sup>23</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre '*The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken*' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998) p223



eighteenth to the early nineteenth centuries<sup>24</sup>. He believes that, at its best, this form of life was a direct challenge to the perspective of civil society because it subordinates mere technical skill to the virtues and goal of sustaining each family's independence and each weaver's own self-reliance. However, contrary to his Marxist work he concludes that most workers since the rise of capitalism have undergone a process of proletarianisation that not only make it necessary for them to resist, but also, 'tends to deprive workers of those forms of practice through which they can discover conceptions of the good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance.'<sup>25</sup> Thus, he argues elsewhere that since its emergence the working class has shown itself to be 'either reformist or unpolitical except in the most exceptional of situations'<sup>26</sup>.

It is no wonder therefore that MacIntyre finished *After Virtue* with the suggestion that we construct local forms of community 'within which civility and the intellectual and moral life can be sustained through the new dark ages which are already upon us' without being able to suggest where we could find the space within a developed capitalist social order for such a development<sup>27</sup>. When he does turn to address this question in his 2007 paper 'How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary' his main example is that how 'plain people' in a local community may become involved, and transformed, is the creation or 'remaking' of a school. He suggests that:

When such an opportunity arises, it is sometimes possible for parents, teachers, and other interested members of the community to become involved and to participate in discussion and decision-making. By so doing they become unable to avoid such questions as 'What kind of school do we want to construct for our children?' and 'What do we want our children to learn?' This latter question, however, cannot be answered unless we also ask not only 'What do we take the

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. pp231-232

<sup>25</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p232

<sup>26</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Marxism and Christianity* (London, Duckworth 1995) p39

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p263

goods of childhood to be?’ and ‘How through achieving the goods of childhood can our children be prepared to achieve later on the goods of adult life?’ but also ‘What are the virtues of teachers, children, and parents?’<sup>28</sup>

However, wonderful though this sounds, it seems somewhat unreal to suggest that virtues and practices directly contrary to the central imperatives of the modern order can become manifest in such local initiatives when he is claiming that there is no space for them to develop in other aspects of people’s lives. Thus, just as the office worker is subject to management discipline and surveillance, the university researcher is subject to the RAE and so forth, so the running of a school in the United Kingdom cannot avoid inspection regimes and league tables. Moreover no school anywhere can avoid further entanglements and compromises over the crucial questions of where its funding is going to come from and how its curriculum relates to the demands of the overall social order. None of this means that it is impossible to fight for alternative values within existing educational institutions, but if the social order contains the contradictions that allow resistance here, then why not elsewhere?

In this context it is interesting to note that in *Dependent Rational Animals* (published in 1999) MacIntyre does briefly acknowledge that resistance sustaining communities did exist amongst Welsh miners into the twentieth century long after the demise of the handloom weavers<sup>29</sup>. If he was to maintain the general analysis of proletarianisation from ‘*The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken*’ MacIntyre would have to treat such apparent counter examples as isolated islands separate from the main flow of capitalist development that have, so far, escaped its full force. Alternatively he could claim that, in such places, an alternative rationality has somehow found a shielded spot where it can re-implant itself in modernity’s wake. This, after all, seems to be the kernel of his appeal to ‘localism’ in the midst of an

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<sup>28</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre ‘How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance and Utopia’ (op cit) p15

<sup>29</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999) p143

otherwise highly pessimistic analysis. The problem, of course, is that such an analysis is also very unconvincing in the light of the forms of resistance that have been, and continue to be, practised by the proletarianised inhabitants of modern societies. Even if we turn to MacIntyre's Welsh miners, as see that Paul Blackledge argues, citing the work of Hywel Francis and Dai Smith on the South Wales Miners' Federation, that a strong case can be made for the role of trade union struggle and organisation in the formation of Welsh mining communities where there would otherwise have simply been 'aggregations of work-people'<sup>30</sup>. Moreover, as Blackledge argues, a key role was played in these communities by militants inspired not by localism but by an internationalist ideal of workers' solidarity<sup>31</sup>. MacIntyre's own acknowledgment of the nature of mining communities could therefore point beyond the confines of 'local' community and towards a logic that is quite contrary to his stated opposition to 'large-scale politics'<sup>32</sup>.

The account that MacIntyre develops after his rejection of Marxism therefore commits him to a pessimism that is difficult to square with the historical record. For example, he claims that since its emergence the working class has shown itself to be 'either reformist or unpolitical except in the most exceptional of situations'<sup>33</sup>. However, this seems to commit him to at least two kinds of mistake. Firstly, he seems to be maintaining that forms of resistance that don't consciously aim at the revolutionary overthrow of the existing system can, for that reason, be termed 'reformist'. What he loses sight of in this case is the possibility that many of the values and ideas that arise from people's lived experience may well run counter to the structures of capitalist society regardless of whether people do themselves consistently

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<sup>30</sup> Paul Blackledge 'Leadership or management: some comments on Alasdair MacIntyre's critique of Marxism' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p116. See also, Paul Blackledge 'Alasdair MacIntyre: Social Practices, Marxism and Ethical Anti-Capitalism' in *Political Studies* Vol. 57 (2009)

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p117

<sup>32</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'An Interview with Giovanna Borradori' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998) p265

<sup>33</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Marxism and Christianity* (London, Duckworth 1995) p39

theorise them, or even explicitly understand their practice as concerned with any kind of political goal. Secondly, there is something very problematic about MacIntyre's assumption that we can neglect historical examples of working class revolutionary movements because they have come to the fore in exceptional situations. To take the obvious example, no one would doubt that the Russian revolution and the European revolutions that followed it were in some sense 'exceptional' – that they required certain pre-conditions that are not constantly present. The assumption behind his statement that they are 'most exceptional' is that there is something in the nature of capitalism that revolutionary situations will rarely, if ever, be repeated – a sweeping statement that seems to have a good deal of faith in the stability of the capitalist social formations.

In one of his contributions to the debates of the first New Left, Charles Taylor stresses that, with its focus on the proletariat, the socialist tradition has been at the 'nerve point' where 'the immensely rich promise of industrialism and its callous destruction of men and their society have clashed most directly'<sup>34</sup>. There are points in MacIntyre's work even after his disenchantment with Marxism where he does acknowledge some positive aspects to modernity<sup>35</sup>. However, once the reality of working class existence had proved to be more complex and contradictory than his earlier, brief, comments about the positive potential for class consciousness allowed, any real appreciation of the positive potential of capitalist society is lost. As Sean Sayers reminds us, for all his condemnation of the callously destructive nature of capitalism, Marx never lost sight of this other positive aspect. As Sayers puts it:

By destroying the self-sufficient peasant household, by shattering its autonomous existence, its members are forced out of the seclusion and isolation, the unchanging rhythms and patterns of rural life. They are liberated

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<sup>34</sup> Charles Taylor 'Alienation and Community' in *Universities & Left Review* 5 Autumn (1958) p11

<sup>35</sup> See for example MacIntyre's comment that the acids of individualism have produced both positive and negative results – Alasdair MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (London, Routledge 1998) p257

from their bondage to the land. By dissolving the traditional pattern of ties and relations, they are freed from the fetters of serfdom, liberated from subservience to the feudal lord. Furthermore, the impact of the market and modern industry meant not only the dissolution and disorganization of traditional social forms and relations, it led also to the creation of new, larger and more developed patterns of relationship. People were concentrated in towns and cities, they were brought together and their activities coordinated in factories, they were put into contact and communication. Their horizons were extended, their consciousness widened, their energies increased.<sup>36</sup>

But, if MacIntyre is plainly wrong to claim that proletarianisation *necessarily* robs workers of the moral resources necessary for resistance, could it perhaps be argued that developments in contemporary capitalism present new and serious challenges as well as opportunities for the emergence of class consciousness? We have already seen the fears of thinkers such as Stuart Hall in the late 1950s, that the rise of working class affluence in the post-war period would lead to a form of consumerist consciousness which would contribute to the undermining of a distinctively working class identity (1.6 above). I have also observed that these developments did not, as it transpired, banish the prospect of class conflict in developed capitalist societies.

However, a more recent line of argument would be to contend that it is the era of neo-liberalism, that is roughly from late 1970s to the present day, in which capitalism is finally developing in such a way as to decisively undermine the potential for the working class to develop forms of community as the basis for resistance. Thus Guy Standing argues that it is the 'disembedding' of the market from society that has taken place in past four decades that has allowed the increasing commodification of all

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<sup>36</sup> Sean Sayers *Marxism and Human Nature* (Abingdon, Routledge 1998) p81

aspects of life leading to a 'precariatisation' of a significant part of the labour force<sup>37</sup>. For Standing, an increasing number of workers are in a precarious position in relation to managers and more generally to market forces that leads both to job and income insecurity and more generally to the denial of any form of 'work-based identity' with 'stable practices, codes of ethics and norms of behaviour, reciprocity and fraternity'<sup>38</sup>. From this perspective MacIntyre's account in his *'The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken'* would have to be rewritten to include an extra century and a half in which the moral resources resistance, and an occasional revolution, were present before it could settle on its final pessimistic conclusion, not with proletarianisation per se but with 'pecarianisation'.

However, although Standing's discussion is a lot more developed than the somewhat sketchy statements that MacIntyre has given on the disastrous nature of proletarianisation, one should still approach his sweeping statements about the 'precariat' with caution. The basic problem is that precariousness has always been a dimension of proletarianisation alongside the potential for self-organisation and resistance. We should, therefore, be suspicious of his claims for the precariat as a separate '*class-in-the-making*' rather than a description of the one aspect of proletarianisation that has been exacerbated by the neo-liberal offensive<sup>39</sup>. Moreover, Standing's pessimism is exaggerated by an understanding of the class structure of modern societies in which alongside the precariat (crippled by the lack of a 'solidaristic labour community'<sup>40</sup>), we have a (shrinking) manual working class and then layers of consultants and technical experts (the 'proficians') and a 'salarial' of those in full time stable employment some of whom are hoping to move into the billionaire elite<sup>41</sup>. What is odd about this is the manner in which groups such as striking teachers or other public sector workers disappear from view. This may well be because, as Richard

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<sup>37</sup> Guy Standing *The Precariat: The New Dangerous Class* (London, Bloomsbury Academic 2011) p26

<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p12

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p7.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid. p12

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. pp7-8

Seymour points out, Standing sees the class nature of the precariat in contrast to a working class identity that is understood from the distorting perspective of incorporation into a European social contract model<sup>42</sup>. Standing's analysis is also notable for the blanket way that it writes off the struggles of still existing parts of the 'manual working class'. Contrary to Standing it requires quite a leap to simply depict workers in the transport sector as nothing more than the product of a shrivelled labour movement that has now lost its 'sense of social solidarity'<sup>43</sup>. In short therefore, although we could use the notion of the 'precariat' to give a fashionable justification to MacIntyre's pessimism, we are still in want of convincing evidence for the kind of sweeping claims that MacIntyre requires.

This is not, of course, to say that nothing is new. In this respect we could consider the regimented condition of call centres workers whose working day is subject to close monitoring by computers and who are plugged into earphones throughout their shift, conditions that represent an obvious barrier to the communication and organic interaction necessary to further solidarity and resistance<sup>44</sup>. In other sectors, such as supermarkets, staff turnover can also act as a barrier to the development of relations of community<sup>45</sup>. However, even here, amongst those who Standing would see as the precariat, it is not a foregone conclusion that such developments will necessarily present insuperable barriers to the development of union organisation and class consciousness especially since both of these examples still present an opportunity for union organisers by bring together a large number of workers with common problems in a single location. Furthermore, although it is important to recognise the issues that these examples raise it would also be wrong to claim that all modern work involves levels of isolation and transiency that prevent communication and solidarity.

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<sup>42</sup> Richard Seymour 'We are all precarious: on the concept of the precariat and its misuses' (10<sup>th</sup> February 2012):

[http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article\\_comments/we\\_are\\_all\\_precarious\\_on\\_the\\_concept\\_of\\_the\\_precariat\\_and\\_its\\_misuses](http://www.newleftproject.org/index.php/site/article_comments/we_are_all_precarious_on_the_concept_of_the_precariat_and_its_misuses)

<sup>43</sup> Standing *The Precariat* (op cit) p8

<sup>44</sup> Owen Jones *Chavs: The Demonization of the Working Class* (London, Verso 2011) p155

<sup>45</sup> Ibid. p154

A realistic account of the effects of proletarianisation is neither that it entails a crippling absence of the resources for resistance, terrible though the neo-liberal offensive of the past decades has often been, nor an automatic route to class consciousness and resistance<sup>46</sup>. Instead it generates a contradictory consciousness that has the potential to develop in different directions. Indeed MacIntyre seems to have switched from an unrealistically rosy picture of the possibilities of working class consciousness in his early Marxist period to an extreme pessimism in the later work without spending too much time examining the potential that lies between.

The obvious starting point for understanding this situation is to be found in the work of Antonio Gramsci. As Gramsci famously suggests, we are presented with a case where:

The personality is strangely composite: it contains Stone Age elements and principles of a more advanced science, prejudices from all past phases of history at the local level and intuitions of a future philosophy which will be that of a human race united the world over.<sup>47</sup>

For Gramsci this is the terrain in which the socialist intellectual goes to work, starting out from existing elements of common sense, thus 'renovating and making 'critical' an already existing activity'<sup>48</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Contradictory reactions to the neo-liberal offensive are interestingly displayed in recent UK social attitude surveys. Thus we see a collapse in the level of support for increasingly money for those on benefits from 58% in 1991 to 27% in 2009. Similarly we see a decrease in the number of people who think that government should redistribute money from the richest to the poorest from 51% in 1989 to 36% in 2009. However, alongside this we see 78% of people in 2009 agreeing that the gap between rich and poor has become too great. See <http://www.guardian.co.uk/news/datablog/2010/dec/13/social-attitudes-survey-british-data>

<sup>47</sup> Antonio Gramsci *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* edited by David Forgacs (New York, New York University Press 2000) pp325-326

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p332



However, it is precisely here that MacIntyre's thought presents us with another cause for pessimism. If, as he has suggested since *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* that rationality is only possible on the basis of a community that can sustain a coherent and self-contained conceptual scheme then the condition of proletarianisation does crucially lack the resources of resistance. This is an idea that I will argue against in chapter 4. In the rest of this chapter I will focus instead on the extent to which the whole notion of 'tradition' in MacIntyre's sense represent a pessimism that undermines any claim to form a revolutionary project and any broader form of resistance.

### 3.3 Looking for order amongst practices in *After Virtue*: introducing the idea of a tradition

MacIntyre's account of the wholly negative effects of proletarianisation and his rejection of his earlier understanding of morality as the education of desire, lead to a gap in his account. What he needs is a broader context in which to give shape to practices, something that he attempts to provide in the account of tradition that begins to take form in *After Virtue*.

The problem of practices, as they have so far been described, is that there will be some coherent human activities which answer to his understanding of a practice, but which stand in need of moral criticism. Thus, although he declares himself 'far from convinced' that either torture or sado-masochistic activity 'answer to the description of a practice which my account of the virtues employs', he does concede that courage may sustain injustice, just as loyalty may strengthen a murderous aggressor and generosity can weaken our ability to do good<sup>49</sup>. What we need, therefore, is an understanding of how we evaluate our participation in particular practices. Secondly, as again MacIntyre concedes, even if we restrict ourselves to those practices (and virtues) that do not merit rejection, we will still be faced with a

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<sup>49</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p200

multiplicity of incompatible options and tragic conflicts<sup>50</sup>. In choosing between these options, arbitrariness in evaluation seems to have reasserted itself, undermining our ability to make rational choices. As MacIntyre puts it:

unless there is a telos which transcends the limited goods of practices by constituting the good of a whole human life, the good of a human life conceived as a unity, it will both be the case that a certain subversive arbitrariness will invade the moral life and that we shall be unable to specify the context of certain virtues adequately.<sup>51</sup>

What we need, in the terms used in *After Virtue*, is a functional concept for human beings, the kind of concept that sets criteria that allows us to judge objectively whether someone is a 'good farmer' or whether something is a 'good watch'<sup>52</sup>. Fortunately, MacIntyre believes that the use of 'man' as a functional concept is far older than Aristotle and does not initially derive from his metaphysics. Instead, he suggests that, 'It is rooted in the forms of social life to which the theorists of the classical tradition give expression'<sup>53</sup>. The starting point for understanding this is to begin with the importance of understanding our lives as an unfolding narrative. MacIntyre suggests that any contemporary attempt to understand a human life as a whole must face both the modern tendency to partition each human life into a variety of segments each with its own norms and behaviour, and the philosophical tendency to separate the person from the roles that the person occupies<sup>54</sup>. However, harking back to ideas that he first explored within his early Marxist humanist work, he maintains that the whole notion of a human action, as opposed to a mere physical movement, requires a context in human reasons that requires a place in a narrative<sup>55</sup>. Thus the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid. p201

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p203

<sup>52</sup> Ibid. pp57-58

<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp58-59

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. p204

<sup>55</sup> Ibid. p208, cf. MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) pp57-58

action of the man in his garden may variously be described as ‘Digging’, ‘Gardening’, ‘Taking exercise’, ‘Preparing for winter’ or ‘Pleasing his wife’ depending on the relevant narrative<sup>56</sup>. If this is true and both conversations and human actions in general are ‘enacted narratives’, then narrative exists before the singer or writer go to work<sup>57</sup>. In fact, human beings are story telling animals. Thus:

I can only answer the question ‘What am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question ‘Of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’ We enter human society, that is, with one or more imputed characters – roles into which we have been drafted – and we have to learn what they are in order to be able to understand how others respond to us and how our responses to them are apt to be construed.<sup>58</sup>

Our guide to our involvement in practices is, therefore, the requirement that our lives make sense as a unity, to ask about our good is to ask how best I might live out the unity of my life and ‘bring it to completion’<sup>59</sup>. This leads to his well known, and somewhat empty, conclusion that:

the good life for man is the life spent in seeking for the good life for man, and the virtues necessary for the seeking are those which will enable us to understand what more and what else the good life for man is.<sup>60</sup>

MacIntyre’s account takes more form when he places practices and narratives in the context of tradition. This is introduced in *After Virtue* through his discussion of human beings as bearers of social identities. Thus he suggests that:

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<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p206

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p211

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p216

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p218

<sup>60</sup> Ibid. p219

I am somebody's son or daughter, someone else's cousin or uncle, I am a citizen of this or that city, a member of this or that guild or profession; I belong to this clan, that tribe, this nation. Hence, what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles. As such, I inherit from the past of my family, my city, my tribe, my nation, a variety of debts, inheritances, rightful expectations and obligations. These constitute the given of my life, my moral starting point. This is in part what gives my life its own moral peculiarity.<sup>61</sup>

Whether I recognise it or not, he suggests, each of us is part of a history and the bearer of a tradition<sup>62</sup>. It is from this, therefore, that MacIntyre seeks to find the social basis for the functional concept of human beings and it is the modern tendency for individuals to see themselves as 'prior to and apart from these roles' that makes such a move impossible<sup>63</sup>.

The problem is that, although MacIntyre situates human beings within traditions, this cannot, by itself, escape the problems of arbitrary choice with which he is grappling. If he were to endorse a conservative understanding of tradition as unreflective adherence to inherited ways of life, then the problem of how we are to develop our personal narratives would indeed be solved. However, MacIntyre has always been at pains to distance his account of tradition from conservatism, suggesting in *After Virtue* that traditions, when vital, 'embody continuities of conflict' and suggesting that the conservative Burkean account, by contrast, arises from a situation in which traditions are 'dying or dead'<sup>64</sup>. Instead, his position does not seem to rule out quite radical forms of re-evaluation of my identity, especially since, as he observes, even 'rebellion against my identity is always one possible mode of expressing it'<sup>65</sup>. In short, if we take his rejection of conservatism seriously, we are left with the problem

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid. p220

<sup>62</sup> Ibid. p221

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p59

<sup>64</sup> Ibid. p222

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p221

that, far from resolving the problem of arbitrary choice his suggestion that ‘what is good for me has to be good for one who inhabits these roles’ is quite compatible with the adoption of a wide variety of incompatible forms of life.

### 3.4 Traditions, problematics and St. Thomas Aquinas

The account of traditions in *After Virtue*, therefore, remains too vague to be capable of giving the necessary direction to our involvement in practices. One way of resolving this problem would be to return to MacIntyre’s earlier attempt to develop an account of how our involvement in certain practices might both satisfy and educate our desires. However, this is not the direction that is taken in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. What we find, instead, is an account of tradition as a form of enquiry governed by a problematic in the manner of a scientific research programme or a work of academic philosophy.

The starting point for this development is MacIntyre’s belief that reason needs to be situated in tradition and that, therefore, the Enlightenment was mistaken in its hope to discover standards of rationality that would automatically present themselves as compelling to everyone regardless of their starting point. As he puts it:

There is no standing ground, no place for enquiry, no way to engage in the practices of advancing, evaluating, accepting, and rejecting reasoned argument apart from that which is provided by some particular tradition or other.<sup>66</sup>

The rationality of tradition constituted enquiry begins, not from the kind of self-evident first principles sought by Descartes, but with ‘pure historical contingency’. The ongoing development of a tradition arises from the contingent starting point of, ‘the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community which constitute a given’ with

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<sup>66</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, Duckworth 1988) p350

authority within such a community conferred upon 'certain texts and certain voices'<sup>67</sup>. In contrast to the Cartesian conception of first principles, MacIntyre instead, promotes the superiority of Aquinas's understanding of rational enquiry. Thus Aquinas suggests that the philosopher seeks to discover first principles, however, as MacIntyre interprets him, these can only be the starting point once a given science is in its perfected state. Contrary to 'neo-Thomists' such as Kleutgen, MacIntyre's understanding of Aquinas does not start from first principles but, instead, ends by justifying them<sup>68</sup>. They are, therefore, the result of tradition based enquiry rather than anything that could be open to any rational person before she had engaged in the Thomistic tradition<sup>69</sup>.

MacIntyre argues that the Enlightenment conception of rationality obscured the idea that the progress of rational enquiry is essentially historical. In contrast to the Enlightenment view, tradition based enquiry has a rather Hegelian sounding form in which:

the standards of rational justification themselves emerge from and are part of a history in which they are vindicated by the way in which they transcend the limitations of and provide remedies for the defects of their predecessors within the history of that same tradition.<sup>70</sup>

MacIntyre conceives the success or failure of tradition based enquiry as being judged against a 'more or less well-defined problematic', consisting in 'that set of issues, difficulties, and problems which have emerged from its previous achievements in enquiry'<sup>71</sup>. It is against this standard that a tradition may fail to make progress, according to its own standards, and enter a period of epistemic crisis. In this situation:

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p354

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. p176

<sup>69</sup> Ibid. pp172-175

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p7

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p167

hitherto trusted methods of enquiry have become sterile. Conflicts over rival answers to key questions can no longer be settled rationally. Moreover, it may indeed happen that the use of the methods of enquiry and of the forms of argument, by means of which rational progress had been achieved so far, begins to have the effect of increasingly disclosing new inadequacies, hitherto unrecognized incoherences, and new problems for the solution of which there seem to be insufficient or no resources within the established fabric of belief.<sup>72</sup>

The attempt to resolve such a crisis will require the invention or discovery of new concepts in a manner that fulfils three requirements. Firstly, the radically new and conceptually enriched scheme will have to offer a solution to the problems that lead to the epistemic crisis and do so in a systemic and coherent way. Secondly, it will have to explain what had led the old understanding of the tradition into crisis. Finally, it must do all of this in a manner that shows a fundamental continuity between the new conceptual and theoretical structures and the terms in which the tradition of enquiry has understood itself up till now<sup>73</sup>.

MacIntyre finds confirmation for his belief in the necessity of tradition in his account of the development of liberalism. As MacIntyre tells the story, liberalism began as a project for a social order in which individuals could 'emancipate themselves from the contingency and particularity of tradition by appealing to genuinely universal, tradition-independent norms'<sup>74</sup>. The problem is that such self-evident tradition-independent norms have proved hard to come by and liberalism has, instead, got itself bogged down in an interminable debate over first principles that would have appeared to its founders as a grave defect. However, the survival of liberalism and the acceptance of the interminable nature of the debate over principles of justice amongst liberal philosophers such as 'Rawls, Rorty and Stout', leads MacIntyre to suggest that

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. pp361-362

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p362

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. p335

liberalism itself has been transformed into a tradition, that is as, 'the articulation of an historically developed and developing set of social institutions and forms of activity'. Moreover, he claims that it is one that has its own *internal* standards of rational justification, its authoritative texts and its disputes over their interpretation and a social expression through a particular kind of hierarchy, who control the selection of alternatives between which the individual (as consumer or voter) can express their preference<sup>75</sup>. MacIntyre concedes that the failure of liberalism does not prove that no tradition-independent perspective is possible. However, since he believes that liberalism is 'by far the strongest claimant' to provide such a perspective 'which has so far appeared in human history or which is likely to appear in the foreseeable future', its failure is, he believes, powerful evidence that practical rationality and justice are relative to a particular tradition.

MacIntyre's central illustration of the possibility of a fruitful encounter between two traditions is that of Thomas Aquinas and his attempt to reconcile the rediscovered work of Aristotle with the Augustinian theology of the medieval Church. We have already seen MacIntyre's suggestion that Aquinas worked towards first principles through a form of tradition based enquiry. This method opens the possibility of simple rejection of alternative traditions, which has been the position taken by many Christians in respect to Aristotle up to the present day. Alternatively, one could start out from the works of Aristotle and the Islamic commentaries of Averroes and hold philosophy to be an independent and superior source of knowledge than that provided by faith<sup>76</sup>. Instead, MacIntyre suggests that Aquinas, under the inspiration of Albertus Magnus and his insistence that we understand each tradition from within, was able to formulate a conception of truth independent of either tradition<sup>77</sup>.

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid. p345

<sup>76</sup> There is the third option of holding the position that P. F. Mandonnet attributes to the Latin Averroists, that a statement could be true in philosophy at the same time as a logically incompatible statement was true in theology, but as MacIntyre observes, to hold such a position is 'to have become in one's own person a *reductio ad absurdum*' see MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (op cit) p114.

<sup>77</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p168



In *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* MacIntyre suggests that Aquinas was able to integrate the two rival schemes and beliefs in such a way that he was able to correct what was 'defective and unsound in each'. Interestingly, he also claims that, retrospectively, we can understand Aquinas as also 'having rescued both standpoints from immanent, even if unrecognized, epistemological crises'<sup>78</sup>. The most obvious alleged shortcoming in either of these the two rival traditions to be identified in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, is Aquinas's claim that Aristotle's account of the ultimate end of human beings must be incomplete without the inclusion from Augustinian Christianity of the contemplation of God in the beatific vision<sup>79</sup>. The most important failing of Augustinianism, at least according to *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, is its tendency in practice to break academic enquiry into a series of unconnected enquiries and so lose the unity of the curriculum. Against this, Aquinas's synthesis was, MacIntyre argues, able to employ Aristotelian ideas as part of a structure that created a real unity between different forms of enquiry in the university curriculum<sup>80</sup>. In addition to this, MacIntyre also suggests that Aquinas was able to correct for the weaknesses of both parties, since Aristotle lacked an account of the will and Augustine 'lacked what Aristotle provided in his findings about the mind's powers and their theoretical and practical embodiments in enquiry'<sup>81</sup>.

### 3.5 Tradition vs. relativism, perspectivism and conservatism

However, if the Enlightenment liberal alternative has failed and rationality and justice are confined to the terms of particular tradition based perspectives, what prevents MacIntyre from succumbing once again to the relativist position that he reached at the end of *A Short History of Ethics*? The relativist would conclude that, since two or more traditions simultaneously provide their adherents with different and incompatible answers as to what is true or rational, our faith in the status of the claims

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<sup>78</sup> *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (op cit) p123

<sup>79</sup> *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p192

<sup>80</sup> *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (op cit) pp130-131.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid. p124

that we make must be undermined. At best we end up with many truths but no Truth. However, MacIntyre's response is that, the only person who could treat all traditions as having an equal status, would be someone standing outside of tradition, but it is the conclusion of the argument that we have so far seen him develop, that it is an illusion to suppose that such a neutral standing ground is possible or that there is, 'some locus for rationality as such, which can afford rational resources sufficient for enquiry independent of all traditions'<sup>82</sup>.

This conclusion could, however, bring its own problems with it since, even if we were to accept that there is no alternative than to situate ourselves within the rationality of tradition, MacIntyre has not yet answered the charge of the perspectivist, that any truth claim made from within a particular tradition is undermined by the purely internal status of the form of justification that this affords<sup>83</sup>. MacIntyre does, of course, accept that different traditions may share some very basic evaluative standards, for example he observes that they will all give a certain authority to logic, but he also maintains that this does not, by itself, provide the means to resolve serious disagreements or ensure that the claims of rival traditions are even commensurable<sup>84</sup>. The result of this is that two rival traditions will characteristically have no neutral way of characterising or evaluating the questions with which they deal that will be accepted by all rational persons regardless of where they are situated. MacIntyre, therefore, accepts that the initial encounter between two traditions may simply involve each tradition making explicit the grounds for its incompatibility, and hence rejection of the other, with at best an acceptance that the rival has something to teach on 'marginal and subordinate questions'<sup>85</sup>. However a second stage can be reached:

if and when the protagonists of each tradition, having considered in what ways their own tradition has by its own standards of achievement in enquiry found it

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<sup>82</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p367

<sup>83</sup> Ibid. p352

<sup>84</sup> Ibid

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p166

difficult to develop beyond a certain point, or has produced in some area some insoluble antinomies, ask whether the alternative and rival tradition may not be able to provide resources to characterize and to explain the failings and defects of their own tradition more adequately than they, using the resources of that tradition, have been able to do.<sup>86</sup>

He adds that the ability to understand a rival tradition requires a 'rare gift of empathy' as well as intellectual insight, a suggestion to which I shall return (see section 4.1 below). However, if this is possible, then a tradition will not automatically vindicate itself against its rivals and, MacIntyre believes, rational justification can proceed in such a way as to answer the perspectivist's charge and allow us to ask the question of what is *really* true rather than simply ask what it is that 'we' (a single community of language users) think the truth to be<sup>87</sup>.

So, although Aquinas may have taken a central role from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* onwards, that he did not previously have in MacIntyre's work, we can see many of the other themes of *After Virtue* developed or maintained. The most important development is MacIntyre's explanation of how our membership of a particular community can form the basis for a developing account of rationality. As we saw earlier, in *After Virtue*, MacIntyre did not satisfactorily explain how we can find our telos from what we have inherited from our background. In *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* we can see that he believes that no one can simply stand outside of tradition and that, to remain within a tradition, we must continue to work in the terms of a given problematic, even if, like Aquinas, we do so in new and innovative ways. We can also see that he still seeks to link rationality and community without resorting to a conservative account of tradition. Thus, in contrast to his praise for Aquinas, Burke is yet again singled out for criticism in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* for theorising

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid. pp166-167

<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p170

‘shoddily’ and doing positive harm to the notion of tradition<sup>88</sup>. Tradition is still understood as the site of conflict, as he puts it, a tradition is ‘an argument extended through time’<sup>89</sup>.

### 3.6 The pessimism of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*

MacIntyre’s account of the relationship between practical rationality and tradition in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* organises our world and the options available to us and does so in the manner of what can be termed a conceptual scheme. Such conceptual schemes, not only organise our world, but do so in a way that is rationally incommensurable with the point of view of other schemes, a type of incommensurability that seems to arise from an intrinsic inability to translate between schemes<sup>90</sup>. In the next chapter I will argue that MacIntyre’s account of the barriers to translation that are the basis for this form of incommensurability cannot be sustained, opening up the possibility for an account of the value of developing intellectual traditions freed from the fetters of the notion of a ‘conceptual scheme’. However, before I turn to the issue of translation, I first need to examine the political implications of his attempt to situate reason within the confines of particular conceptual schemes.

Kelvin Knight argues that, the account of rationality developed in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, takes us away from the perspective of *A Short History of Ethics* in which rival perspectives were simply a question of personal choice. He also

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<sup>88</sup> *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p8 and p353

<sup>89</sup> Ibid. p12

<sup>90</sup> For a classic summary of the claims of theorists of conceptual schemes see Donald Davidson ‘On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme’ in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1984) p183. The only sense in which MacIntyre’s idea of tradition seems to part company with Davidson’s account of what is entailed in holding to a conceptual scheme is MacIntyre’s attempt to defend a notion of truth that is independent of the claims of any particular tradition, rather than in making reality itself relative to the scheme in question. For a summary of the different claims that have been made concerning incommensurability see Ruth Chang’s introduction to *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* edited by Ruth Chang (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 1997) p1. For MacIntyre’s distinction between rational enquiry and truth see Alasdair MacIntyre ‘Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification’ in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity 1998) p207.

believes that, since an individual's reason is necessarily practised within some tradition, the nightmare vision of the fragmentation of reasoning in *After Virtue* can also be surmounted<sup>91</sup>. However, in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, MacIntyre himself, only unambiguously endorses this judgment for one of the three types of people who inhabit modernity, that is the type of person for whom, 'an encounter with some particular tradition of thought and action in respect of these matters may provide is an occasion for self-recognition and self-knowledge'<sup>92</sup>. Others, he acknowledges, will find themselves 'aliens' to every tradition of enquiry, because 'he or she brings to the encounter with such traditions, standards of rational justification which the beliefs of no tradition could satisfy'<sup>93</sup>. Such a position suggests to MacIntyre a Nietzschean perspective, in which traditions form a series of 'falsifying masquerades' behind which lurks the will to power<sup>94</sup>. From this perspective, one could only come to enter into the kind of scheme of belief represented by a tradition, or to a position where one could have a meaningful conversation with it, by an act of arbitrary will that lacks any sufficient supporting reasons<sup>95</sup>. Finally, the most interesting, and most common, case is that of people who have some into contact with elements of different traditions and are not convinced Nietzscheans but, instead, live:

betwixt and between accepting usually unquestioningly the assumptions of the dominant liberal individualist forms of public life, but drawing in different areas of their lives upon a variety of tradition-generated resources of thought and action, transmitted from a variety of familial, religious, educational, and other social and cultural sources. This type of self which has too many half-convictions and too few settled coherent convictions, too many partly formulated alternatives and too few opportunities to evaluate them systematically, brings to its encounters with the claims of rival traditions a

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<sup>91</sup> Kelvin Knight's editor's introduction to *The MacIntyre Reader* (op cit) p17

<sup>92</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p394

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p395

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. pp395-396

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. pp396-397

fundamental incoherence which is too disturbing to be admitted to self-conscious awareness except on the rarest of occasions.<sup>96</sup>

As we have now seen, MacIntyre's answer to the charge of relativism requires that we are already committed to a particular tradition, a position that he himself now seems to have admitted cannot be the case for a great many people. One way to get out of this would be to follow Thomas D'Andrea's reading of MacIntyre and argue that the experience of living and working in an 'established social order' will provide most people with an education into a tradition of enquiry that, although perhaps not consciously developed or pursued, could yet be the basis for tradition based enquiry<sup>97</sup>. However, for MacIntyre, traditions arise from communities that can sustain their own distinctive conceptual schemes, communities that, as we have already seen, he believes have been pushed to margins of the modern social order. To claim that most people really are (consciously or not) situated within a single cohesive tradition in MacIntyre's very demanding sense is scarcely credible both as a description of social reality, or as a reading of MacIntyre's remarks on the 'variety of tradition-generated resources' within each person.

It, therefore, seems as if the commitment to a single cohesive tradition requires some kind of conversion, even for those who have already had some contact with elements of tradition based thinking. MacIntyre does not discuss the implications of conversion in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, but it is a topic that he does examine in *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue* (2006). Although his ultimate aim here is to put into context Stein's own conversion to Catholicism, he is at pains to stress that conversion need not involve the acceptance of a form of theistic belief and may, instead, involve the acceptance of a secular *Weltanschauung* that requires both intellectual and moral commitment. Secondly, and most importantly, he also wishes to

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid. p397

<sup>97</sup> Thomas D. D'Andrea *Tradition, Rationality, and Virtue: The Thought of Alasdair MacIntyre* (Aldershot, Ashgate 2006) p338

reject the idea that conversion must be characterised either negatively, as the abandonment of reason, or positively, as moving beyond reason's supposed limitations<sup>98</sup>. Instead, MacIntyre seeks to defend the possibility that conversion might enhance our rational powers. For such people:

They now perceive and understand something that previously they were unable to perceive and understand, both about themselves and about the world. So they are in a position to answer to such questions as: What new light has been cast on my past life? What power was it that transformed me? And what new direction must my life take, given that I now perceive and understand it as I do? The claim made by such converts is, to put matters in Augustine's terms, that, because they now believe, they now are able to understand certain things.<sup>99</sup>

He adds, however, that since it is just as possible to be converted to atheism, theism, Judaism, Christianity, Catholicism, Protestantism and so on, not all the claims to knowledge made by converts can be correct<sup>100</sup>.

One way, in which a conversion could be characterised as leading to a growth in our rational powers, would be to claim that it was only from the new perspective that what we were before can be understood and properly ordered. This, in effect, is what MacIntyre claims about Franz Rosenzweig's conversion to Judaism, which he describes as Rosenzweig's discovery of a fundamental continuity in his life in which, despite his secular upbringing and his one time wish to convert to Christianity, 'he had always been a Jew and now had learned what it is to be a Jew'<sup>101</sup>. Similarly MacIntyre suggests that, although Stein's conversion to Catholicism was an experience of 'neither

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<sup>98</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Edith Stein: A Philosophical Prologue* (London, Rowman & Littlefield 2006) p143

<sup>99</sup> Ibid. p144

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid. p169

continuity nor discontinuity', it was even so a transformation 'in which everything of importance in her adult life found a place'<sup>102</sup>.

However, neither of these suggestions will help us much in getting to grips with those who MacIntyre has characterised as living 'betwixt and between'. Firstly, even if MacIntyre is right to suggest that *everything* of importance found a place in Stein's life after her conversion, this could not be generalised to a great many other people without neglecting the reality of tragic conflicts and sacrifice that must often attend such transformations. Secondly, and most fundamentally, given the many different and incompatible narratives that could meaningfully be developed from a life influenced by a variety of tradition-generated resources and half-convictions, we seem to be back in the position described in *After Virtue* facing an arbitrary choice without the guidance of a problematic.

MacIntyre's only real option would seem to be to encourage us to make an arbitrary leap of faith to adopt a tradition, any tradition, so as to begin the process of rational enquiry wherever it may subsequently lead. It is interesting, in this respect, to consider what he has to say in *Edith Stein* about George Lukaćs's decision to join the Hungarian Communist Party. MacIntyre suggests that Lukaćs's initial decision in 1918 / 1919 was expressed in 'Kierkegaardian terms' as a 'deliberate act of faith' rather than 'the conclusion of a chain of reasoning'<sup>103</sup>. However, this conversion, a term that MacIntyre reminds us Lukaćs would not have used from his later vantage point, 'had enabled him to perceive and to understand aspects of himself and of the social order which his bourgeois educational attitudes had hitherto obscured'<sup>104</sup>. What Lukaćs was then able to do was to present Marxism, not as an arbitrary commitment, but, instead, as the rational solution to the problems of limitations of the philosophical difficulties that he encountered within German idealist philosophy and to present Marxism as

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p170

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p159

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p160



‘something to be reckoned with philosophically’, something that MacIntyre believes theorists of the Second International had been unable to do<sup>105</sup>.

Of course, MacIntyre himself does not present his account of tradition based enquiry in terms of a call for arbitrary commitment. For one thing, as a solution to the problems of modernity it would suggest a fairly crude form of idealism in which we simply will into existence the relationships and modes of thought necessary to sustain rational enquiry, when, in fact, MacIntyre stresses the connection between rational enquiry and forms of community<sup>106</sup>. Traditions arise from ‘the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community’ where authority is conferred upon ‘certain texts and certain voices’<sup>107</sup>. Those who live ‘betwixt and between’ can only escape from the moral wilderness by living a different life. What we can now see is that, on the basis of MacIntyre’s account of tradition based enquiry, the rational justification for such a revolutionary transformation will not be available to those who lack a tradition. Given his continued opposition to the idea of treating people as passive raw material that can be transformed by others, it is very difficult to see how any such process could come about<sup>108</sup>. It is, therefore, very difficult to understand how this could reasonably be described as a ‘revolutionary Aristotelianism’ in the sense of providing ‘legitimation and coordination’ to the struggle to subordinate institutions to practices and so transform previously isolated struggles into ‘a new class war of attrition’<sup>109</sup>. To put it bluntly, Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ requires the ability to win over people with a contradictory consciousness<sup>110</sup>. The later MacIntyre, therefore, remains a deeply pessimistic figure.

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<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> Even though, as we saw in the previous chapter, MacIntyre himself fails to give a convincing account of the relation of ‘base’ and ‘superstructure’ in his later work. See sections 2.5-2.7 above.

<sup>107</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p354

<sup>108</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre ‘*The Theses on Feuerbach: A Road Not Taken*’ in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998)

<sup>109</sup> Knight ‘Revolutionary Aristotelianism’ (op cit) p896

<sup>110</sup> For the concept of a ‘war of position’ and its contrast with a ‘war of manoeuvre’ see Gramsci *The Gramsci Reader* (op cit) pp225-227

### 3.7 Theory and ‘plain persons’

MacIntyre has joked that his slogan would have to be ‘forward to the twelfth century’<sup>111</sup>. Such optimism, as there is in his mature works, concerns the possibilities for our maintaining the elements of community and tradition that existed before the rise of the modern social order and the hope that they might outlive our present condition and flourish again<sup>112</sup>. In part, therefore, such hope as MacIntyre does give us for the future depends on tradition having played the role that he claims for it in the past. It is, therefore, crucial to ask whether, even in pre-capitalist societies, the majority of people were ever able to relate to tradition based theorising in the way that MacIntyre assumes. One way to approach this issue is to ask how those who are ‘innocent of philosophy’, whom MacIntyre terms ‘plain persons’<sup>113</sup>, are to relate to the often very demanding theoretical content of traditions.

Part of the difficulty of understanding how plain persons are to relate to the products of tradition arises from the intellectual complexity of the debates within those traditions, such as the theological and philosophical issues faced by Aquinas in developing his synthesis of Aristotelian and Augustinian thought summarised above in section 3.4. The relationship between plain persons and theory is crucially affected by the shift that Jean Porter observes from *After Virtue*, where traditions are a moral concept ‘a part of the necessary framework for developing the idea of virtue’, to the essentially epistemic and linguistic understanding of tradition that is developed from *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* onwards<sup>114</sup>. A tradition from this later perspective is referential, as Porter suggests, it is ‘about’ something. This is, after all, an understanding of tradition that draws quite plainly from debates within the philosophy

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<sup>111</sup> As reported by *Newsweek* 14 September 1981 quoted in Francis Wheen *How Mumbo-Jumbo Conquered the World: A Short Story of Modern Delusions* (London, Harper Perennial 2004) p185

<sup>112</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre ‘*After Virtue* and Marxism: A Response to Wartofsky’ in *Inquiry*, Volume 27 (1984) p252

<sup>113</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) pp329-330

<sup>114</sup> Jean Porter ‘Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre’ in *Alasdair MacIntyre* edited by Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003) p50

of science about the rationality of the scientific enterprise in terms of scientific paradigms, research programmes and the like<sup>115</sup>.

However, if we move away from such highly theoretical issues as the depiction of human agency in Augustine and Aristotle, or the coherence of the thirteenth century university curriculum and engage in the forms of moral reflection in which 'plain persons' will be more at home, can we find a similar place for the kinds of claims that can be dealt with within the terms of a problematic? For example, Porter asks whether it is possible to treat moral philosophy as on a par with scientific or observational statements, because of the grounding that the former may have in our collective commitments and decisions<sup>116</sup>. This leads her to consider whether we cannot say that the encounter between two moral traditions can simply be depicted as an encounter between two rival decisions about how to arrange our lives, rather than a *disagreement*. As Porter admits, such an objection raises important questions about the relationship between facts and values that requires a serious discussion in its own right.

MacIntyre's response would, however, be clear from his comments in his 1994 essay 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' where he suggests that human moral communities will reject, and have rejected relativism, because claims of 'unqualified moral hegemony' are 'so nearly universal among human cultures'. Just like the Javanese who allegedly claim that 'To be human is to be Javanese':

What is being claimed on behalf of each particular moral standpoint in its conflicts with its rivals is that its distinctive account (whether fully explicit or

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<sup>115</sup> Interestingly it is the philosophy of science that takes centre stage in MacIntyre's first major discussion of tradition in his 1977 essay 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science' published even as he was writing *After Virtue*. See Alasdair MacIntyre 'Epistemological Crises, Dramatic Narrative and the Philosophy of Science' in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006)

<sup>116</sup> Porter 'Tradition in the Recent Work of Alasdair MacIntyre' (op cit) p54

partially implicit) of the nature, status and content of morality (both of how the concepts of a good, a virtue, a duty and right action are to be correctly understood, and of what in fact are goods or the good, virtues, duties and types of right action) is true.<sup>117</sup>

MacIntyre's account of tradition will, therefore, have application to ideas about how to live, as long as we believe that we are able to find at least an implicit commitment to a certain account of human flourishing within them.

However, even if traditions as experienced by plain persons do commit them to making certain claims about the good life, how are they supposed to evaluate the specific and controversial statements made by the theorists of tradition? In his 1995 essay 'Natural law as subversive: the case of Aquinas' MacIntyre attempts to get to grips with this question in relation to J. B. Schneewind's accusation that the complexity in the reasoning required by Aristotelian and Thomist accounts of ethics in moving between primary and secondary precepts, renders judgments in morality and law the preserve of an elite<sup>118</sup>. Thus, whereas the primary and general principles, including prohibitions on 'adultery, theft, and like acts' are within the understanding of the 'greater number of persons', there are precepts which require 'sophisticated reflection and inference' so much so, that it is possible for the unsophisticated to deny them without culpability<sup>119</sup>. MacIntyre suggests that what plain persons will lack in such cases is a sound argument. However, although this is not something that they could formulate for themselves:

all plain persons as such have the capacity for recognizing the truth of the premises for which Aquinas argues and, confronted by those arguments for the conclusions at which Aquinas arrives, plain persons have the capacity for

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<sup>117</sup> MacIntyre 'Moral Relativism, Truth and Justification' (op cit) p204

<sup>118</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Natural law as subversive: the case of Aquinas' in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2006) p58

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. pp58-59

recognizing their soundness. The role of the philosopher and the theologian in supplying the needed arguments is therefore an important and even in some cases an indispensable one<sup>120</sup>.

Contrary to Schneewind, MacIntyre believes that we can say that theologians are not the ultimate source of knowledge on law, but are, rather, 'unusually reflective plain persons' who are 'able to present their reflections to others for the rational verdict of those others'<sup>121</sup>. Moreover, he stresses that Aquinas's conception of natural law, in fact, defended the ability of plain persons to judge the actions of princes to be just or unjust, at a time when figures like Frederick II were attempting to give royal authority a 'sacred and numinous quality'<sup>122</sup>.

However, in order to relate to others merely as an 'unusually reflective plain person', a theorist must be able to show that he or she has the answers to problems that are relevant enough to ordinary persons for them to be able to give a rational verdict. As we have already seen, on MacIntyre's account, this seems to require that the thought of both theorist and 'plain person' arises from 'the beliefs, institutions, and practices of some particular community'. It is, of course, an important part of MacIntyre's work that the lack of shared norms and community in the conditions of modernity prevent theorists from connecting to the concerns of a great many 'plain persons' within their societies. The question that arises is whether any of the great theorists of tradition like Aquinas or Augustine were ever in a stronger position in their own societies.

What MacIntyre needs to be able to do, is to appeal to some fundamental difference in the nature of societies before the rise of modern capitalism. Such a distinction can be provided by theories of a 'great divide' between pre-modern

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid. p59

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. pp53-54

consensus and the divergence of different ethical perspectives that attends the rise of modern capitalism. This, as Abercrombie, Hill and Turner remind us, is of course, just the claim that is made by many of the classic works of social theory including Tönnies's distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity and Weber's account of the transition between charismatic or traditional authority and capitalist society with its legal/rational form<sup>123</sup>. It is also the perspective that is evident in MacIntyre's short 1967 book *Secularization and Moral Change*. Here he claims that the urbanization of the Industrial Revolution destroyed older forms of community to which religion had given symbolic expression with 'shared and established norms, common to all ranks in the community, in the light of which everyone stands either vindicated or convicted by their own conduct'<sup>124</sup>. As he says:

The homogeneity of pre-industrial life is, of course, easily exaggerated, but the sharpness of the transition from the values of pre-industrial society to the values of life in the Industrial Revolution can scarcely be exaggerated ... In the seventeenth century even the deepest social divisions still allow of a common appeal to moral and religious standards.<sup>125</sup>

Thus both Charles I and Colonel Rainsborough could appeal to God or Scripture, but, by the time of Defoe, Christianity was impotent when confronted with the 'autonomous motives of trade and the pursuit of wealth' in *Robinson Crusoe*<sup>126</sup>.

However, although Charles I and Colonel Rainsborough may both have been able to appeal to God, this does not mean that MacIntyre's case isn't very problematic given the evidence we have of ignorance, indifference and scepticism in England

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<sup>123</sup> Nicholas Abercrombie, Stephen Hill and Bryan S. Turner *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (London, George Allen & Unwin Ltd 1980) p66

<sup>124</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Secularization and Moral Change* (London, Oxford University Press 1967) p12

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. pp12-13

<sup>126</sup> Ibid. p13

before the industrial revolution and urbanisation. Thus, commenting on popular belief in sixteenth and seventeenth century England in *Religion and the Decline of Magic*, Keith Thomas casts doubt on the idea that pre-industrial society was marked by universal acceptance of orthodox Christian doctrine. As he puts it:

Although complete statistics will never be obtainable, it can be confidently said that not all Tudor or Stuart Englishmen went to some kind of church, that many of those who did went with considerable reluctance, and that a certain proportion remained throughout their lives ignorant of the elementary tenets of Christian dogma.<sup>127</sup>

Moreover, although we have evidence for directly articulated religious scepticism from both aristocratic intellectuals and from common people<sup>128</sup>, it is ignorance and indifference to religious belief that seems to have been most prevalent amongst the poor, as the evidence of low church attendance<sup>129</sup> and of misbehaviour, when they were in attendance, seems to bear out<sup>130</sup>. What cannot have helped, when it came to the overall level of religious knowledge of uneducated people, was the nature of the sermons they would endure, sermons which, as Thomas suggests, were often pitched 'far above the capacity of most of their listeners' in the hope of attracting the eye of an influential patron<sup>131</sup>. As Thomas describes it, this is, therefore, a situation in which 'Preaching was popular with the educated classes, but aroused the irritation of others'<sup>132</sup>. Thomas cautions that we should be careful in accepting too readily the complaints of 'severe divines' of the heathen nature of those around them, but that

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<sup>127</sup> Keith Thomas *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (London, Penguin 1973) p189

<sup>128</sup> Ibid. pp198-205

<sup>129</sup> Ibid. pp189-191

<sup>130</sup> See ibid. pp191-192. 'Presentments made before the ecclesiastical courts show that virtually every kind of irreverent (and irrelevant) activity took place during divine worship. Members of the congregation jostled for pews, nudged their neighbours, hawked and spat, knitted, made course remarks, told jokes, fell asleep, and even let off guns.' Ibid. p191.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p193. Here Thomas quotes John Locke to the effect that, 'You. ... may as well talk Arabic to a poor day labourer as the notions and languages that the books and disputes of religion are filled with; and as soon you will be understood.'

<sup>132</sup> Ibid. p191

such evidence we have, allows us to conclude that 'a substantial proportion of the population regarded organized religion with an attitude which varied from cold indifference to frank hostility'<sup>133</sup>.

However, although such evidence does seem to undermine the version of the 'great divide' that MacIntyre attempts to give in 1967, one could simply reply that the argument of his later works is quite compatible with some kind of rupture having already opened up before Charles I and Rainsborough, so long as it happened after Aquinas. Indeed, as we saw in 2.7 above, this seems to be exactly what he is doing in his response to Wartofsky, when he stresses the 'sharp contrast' between 'the self-aggrandizing drive for power and money in the European communities of the twelfth and even the thirteenth century and that drive in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries'<sup>134</sup>. The problem with this alternative timescale is that claims about the inclusion of the medieval poor and peasantry within Catholicism have proved to be just as controversial as the claim that England, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, constituted a culture, in which common appeal to moral and religious standards was possible between the classes. Thus, in *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, Abercrombie et al argue that, during the Middle Ages, the poor 'did not attend church regularly, did not hear the sermons, did not take the sacraments and were ignorant of the basic message of the Christian faith'<sup>135</sup>. They even go so far as to suggest that there is ample support for the view that orthodox Catholicism was primarily the belief system of the urban elite of medieval society, whereas the rural poor maintained their allegiance to 'sorcerers, witchcraft, pagan rites and folk culture'<sup>136</sup>. This is echoed by Thomas, who claims that, the idealization of the Middle Ages as possessing a time of moral unity is a product of, what he describes as, 'unhistorically minded sociologists', who did not account for the degree of apathy, heterodoxy and agnosticism, which he suggests

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid. p204

<sup>134</sup> See MacIntyre 'A Response to Wartofsky' (op cit) p253

<sup>135</sup> Abercrombie et al *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (op cit) p75

<sup>136</sup> Ibid. pp76-77



existed 'long before the onset of industrialism'<sup>137</sup>. Indeed, for Thomas, Medieval religion had laid its emphasis 'upon the regular performance of ritual duties, rather than on the memorizing of theological beliefs'<sup>138</sup>.

It is, of course, possible that Thomas and Abercrombie et al have overstated the extent to which Medieval or early modern societies lacked moral unity, this is an area where the judgments of the historian will be based on indirect evidence whose interpretation will remain controversial and subject to revision in the light of new research. However, although the degree of division and unity may be subject to reinterpretation, it is also difficult to see how a simple account of shared belief could be reinstated in the light of this evidence. So, even if the truth does turn out to be somewhere in the middle, what we can say is that MacIntyre fails to give us any idea of how his account of the ability of Aquinas, or other theorists of tradition, to speak with and for others, is affected by the evidence that these historians and sociologists have unearthed. As we have seen, it is MacIntyre himself, who stresses the importance of understanding the context of philosophical ideas<sup>139</sup>. In practice, however, despite the hundreds of pages on the historical development of traditions in *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, this is an issue that he does not address.

Moreover, whatever broader analysis emerges from the future work of historians, such work already gives us strong grounds to question MacIntyre's account. As we will see in the next chapter (in section 4.1), for MacIntyre, traditions are crucially embodied within a language. As he puts it:

Every tradition is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture. The

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<sup>137</sup> Thomas *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (op cit) pp205-206

<sup>138</sup> Ibid. p196

<sup>139</sup> 'A moral philosophy – and emotivism is no exception – characteristically presupposes a sociology.' MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p23

invention, elaboration, and modification of the concepts through which both those who found and those who inherit a tradition understand it are inescapably concepts which have been framed in one language rather than another.<sup>140</sup>

However, one thing that we can be sure about, is that the Medieval Church was divided from 'plain persons' in subordinate social groups by language, with the former expressing their ideas in Latin and court French and the latter using vernacular languages<sup>141</sup>. There is, therefore, more than one sense in which Aquinas did not speak the same language as many other inhabitants of his social order.

In short, and for very obvious reasons, the kind of theorising that is preserved in the texts of thinkers like Aquinas has to be read carefully and in the full light of our knowledge of the real divisions that existed between elites and subordinate classes in pre-modern societies. Seen from this perspective, Aquinas was at best an 'unusually reflective plain person' of the Medieval elite and cannot simply be read as giving expression to a tradition that is straightforwardly shared with subordinates. MacIntyre's account of traditions, therefore, fails to theorise an important aspect of class division and thus fails to recognise the extent to which the lack of a shared moral framework and vocabulary may not simply be a product of modernity. Such is the pitfall of discussing traditions and conceptual schemes solely in the context of 'communities' without recognising the role of the 'dull compulsion of economic relations' in regulating social interaction<sup>142</sup>.

### 3.8 Conclusion: 'revolutionary Aristotelianism' is not revolutionary

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<sup>140</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) pp371-372

<sup>141</sup> Abercrombie et al *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (op cit) p75

<sup>142</sup> Abercrombie et al distinguish 'common culture' theories of social stability from those that stress the 'dull compulsion of economic relations'. See Abercrombie et al *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* (op cit) p57

In 'How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary', MacIntyre discusses the charge levelled at opponents of established power, that the kind of institutions they are trying to create and sustain are simply not possible, that they represent a Utopia. In response, he distinguishes his utopianism, which he considers to be a utopianism of the present, from the utopianism of the future, that is forms of utopianism that sacrifice the present in the name of some imaginary glorious future. In contrast to the utopianism of the future, the utopianism of the present refuses to make such a sacrifice, insisting instead on the existence of a range of present possibilities that is far greater than the established order is able to allow for and, thus, seeks to transform people's political imaginations<sup>143</sup>.

However, the problem with MacIntyre's later politics is precisely that he fails to make the crucial link between expanding people's conception of present possibilities with the need for future transformation. If the point is that any attempt to bridge the two will involve treating people as expendable raw material, then what he is saying seems neither plausible, especially in the light of his own earlier Marxist humanism, nor revolutionary. However, just as important is the observation that we can now make, in the light of the discussion of the previous section, that MacIntyre is guilty of a third type of utopianism, that is a utopianism of the past. His account of resistance, and the construction of any better world, is thus to be limited according to the possibilities suggested by an account of past traditions that obscures the reality of oppression and division that really existed in thirteenth century Europe.

MacIntyre's account of how our involvement in practices can educate us about our good and lead to forms of satisfaction that do not presuppose a zero-sum competition with others, is a promising development of the extremely sketchy way that he discussed the education of desire in his earlier Marxist work. However, his development of the concept of traditions, in *After Virtue* and its sequels, ultimately

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<sup>143</sup> MacIntyre 'How Aristotelianism can become revolutionary: Ethics, Resistance and Utopia' (op cit) pp16-17

fails to present any alternative to the arbitrary choice of commitments that was the fate of the inhabitants of modernity as outlined in *A Short History of Ethics*. We have also now seen that MacIntyre's rejection of any alternative constructive project arises from two sources, firstly, his uniformly negative account of the effects of proletarianisation, and secondly, his attempt to theorise rational criticism in terms of self-enclosed conceptual schemes. We have already seen, in section 3.2, that his account of proletarianisation is not developed in enough detail to answer some fairly obvious objections about the resistance of the working class to the demands of capital. In the following chapter I will argue that we also have good reasons to reject what MacIntyre's claims about the status of traditions as conceptual schemes.



# Chapter 4

## Traditions and conceptual schemes

What we need is a plausible account of how we can build moral resources that challenge the existing order. As we have already seen, the emotivist critic can condemn all he or she likes, and, like Ayer, even end up on the right side of the argument, however, whatever force her judgments have, can only be borrowed from non-emotivist sources or simply end up as a assertion of pure will. MacIntyre temporarily abandoned the search for such moral sources in *A Short History of Ethics*, only to again attempt to identify them in the work that begins with *After Virtue*. However, we have now seen that, rather than constituting a genuinely revolutionary Aristotelianism, this work has nothing constructive to say to those who exist under the conditions of proletarianisation and contradictory consciousness and, instead, takes as paradigmatic an account of tradition based enquiry that does not take account of the reality of class divisions past or present.

This chapter represents the final part of my evaluation of MacIntyre's attempt to develop an alternative to Marxism in *After Virtue* and the works that followed it. The main aim, here, is to undermine MacIntyre's pessimism by showing why we are justified in rejecting his account of traditions as conceptual schemes set out in such works as *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*. As we saw in chapter 3, it is MacIntyre's commitment to this perspective that is the last serious support for his pessimistic denial of the possibilities of 'large-scale' politics and his championing of the perspective of 'local' community. It is also a discussion that raises important issues about the role of human nature in understanding our pursuit of the good.

I begin, in sections 4.1 and 4.2, by looking at MacIntyre's distinction between tradition based languages-in-use, between which, he claims, true translation is impossible, and, what he terms, the internationalised languages of modernity, which seem to offer the ability to translate but only at the cost of

distortion. The impossibility of translation is crucial to MacIntyre's attempt to confine rational enquiry to the terms of discrete conceptual schemes / traditions. I will argue that, whatever problems of translation MacIntyre highlights, he fails on any fundamental level to show that interpretation between different conceptual schemes is impossible. In section 4.3 I consider one last attempt that could be made to defend the perspective of self-enclosed traditions, by looking at the more extreme examples presented by attempts to interpret the thought of those who stand either side of important watersheds in the development of human thought, such as the rise of literate or scientific culture. Again I will argue that even such extreme examples do not justify the kind of point that MacIntyre seeks to advance. Then, in section 4.4, I move on to the topic of human nature arguing that, contrary to what MacIntyre has to say in *A Short History of Ethics*, an understanding of human nature cannot be simply confined to the terms of a particular conceptual scheme, but can, instead, form part of our basis for understanding others. The freeing of human nature from the bonds of the idea of a conceptual scheme will have important implications in chapter 6. I conclude, in 4.5, by suggesting that we need to acknowledge both the historically developing nature of human needs and desires and the constraints provided by both human nature and the nature of the social order that we inhabit.

#### 4.1 Conceptual schemes and languages in use

We have seen, in the previous chapter, that MacIntyre's conception of a tradition provides the basis for a debilitating pessimism rather than a revolutionary Aristotelianism. However, we have not yet properly examined how plausible his claims for the existence of such self-contained conceptual schemes really are. A crucial component of this position is the idea that different conceptual schemes are rationally incommensurable with one another and that we are prevented from developing a wider evaluative framework by the supposed impossibility of translating the terms of an alien scheme. In this chapter I will argue that we can interpret others, even when their picture of the world is quite different to our own, leading to the conclusion that traditions cannot be the self-contained conceptual

schemes that MacIntyre conceives them to be and, thus, allowing us to consider what it might be like to develop a tradition of resistance to capitalism independently of their shackles.

The best place to begin is by remembering quite how central language is to MacIntyre's account of what it is to inhabit a tradition / conceptual scheme. As MacIntyre claims in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*:

Every tradition is embodied in some particular set of utterances and actions and, thereby in all the particularities of some specific language and culture. The invention, elaboration, and modification of the concepts through which both those who found and those who inherit a tradition understand it are inescapably concepts which have been framed in one language rather than another.<sup>1</sup>

However, if language is central to the way in which we inhabit a conceptual scheme, it also places limits on our ability to understand others. Indeed, MacIntyre claims that modernity gives us the mistaken impression that we can understand and judge works from a range of conceptual schemes, but that, in fact, it takes a 'rare gift of empathy' to understand a rival tradition<sup>2</sup>. This gift is something that is possessed by those 'rarely numerous' 'inhabitants of boundary situations' who will generally incur 'the suspicion and misunderstanding of members of both of the contending parties'<sup>3</sup>.

In developing this account of the relationship of language and tradition, MacIntyre distinguishes between two different types of language, what he terms 'languages-in-use' and the 'internationalized' languages of modernity. Of these it is 'languages-in-use' that are the bearers of tradition. The person who is able to recognise him or herself, unproblematically, in a particular tradition, will

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, Duckworth 1988) pp371-372

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. p167

<sup>3</sup> MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (op cit) p114



‘characteristically have learned to speak and write what he terms a particular language-in-use’<sup>4</sup>. Such languages are conceived as tied very closely to a particular community; indeed, he claims that, for such languages, ‘The boundaries of a language are the boundaries of some linguistic community which is also a social community’<sup>5</sup>. For example, MacIntyre claims that the story of *Gawain and the Green Knight* should not be seen as a work of the English language or even of ‘fourteenth-century-English-as-such’ but instead ‘the-fourteenth-century-English-of-Lancashire-and-surrounding-districts’. Similarly, he dismisses such terms as ‘classical Latin’ or ‘early modern Irish’ and suggests, instead, that we think in terms of ‘Latin-as-written-and-spoken-in-the-Rome-of-Cicero’ and ‘Irish-as-written-and-spoken-in-sixteenth-century-Ulster’.

In contrast to such communally embedded languages, are the ‘internationalized languages of modernity’ such as the late-twentieth century versions of English, Spanish, German and Japanese. These are not the bearers of tradition but have, instead, developed, ‘so as apparently to become potentially available to anyone and everyone, whatever their membership in any or no community’<sup>6</sup>. There is, however, one form of internationalised language that MacIntyre is keen not to separate so starkly from tradition and this is the form exemplified by medieval Latin, the language in which Thomas Aquinas developed what MacIntyre considers to be the most successful and enduring defence of a tradition based perspective. He, therefore, argues that, although the Latin of Aquinas’s time was, along with medieval Arabic, an internationalised language in the sense that it was used by inhabitants of a variety of different social and political orders, it differed from modern internationalised English in that it still presupposed a large degree of shared tradition and belief<sup>7</sup>. Again, however, we should bear in mind that Aquinas’s world was not, in many respects, a world that he shared with those who lived outside of the urban and ecclesiastical elites and not one in which Latin was understood by the majority.

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<sup>4</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p394

<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p373

<sup>6</sup> ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pp373-374

MacIntyre's schema suggests two different problems for the would be translator, that is the task of translating between different languages-in-use embodying different incommensurable beliefs, and that of translating between any such languages and the internationalised languages of modernity. Illustrating the first problem of translating from one community's language in use which is 'expressive of and presupposes a particular system of well-defined beliefs' into that of another community, MacIntyre asks us to consider how we could translate the invocation of the divinity of Jupiter and Augustus in Horace's *Odes* into the Hebrew of the first century BCE. Such a passage could, he suggests, only be understood and so translated in terms of an 'idolatrous regard for evil spirits' that is 'false and blasphemous'<sup>8</sup>. If we were to translate this passage into Hebrew and then to translate the Hebrew back into Latin, MacIntyre believes that the failure of translation and the changes of meaning involved would become apparent, since we would end up with a Latin text that would be rejected by its original author<sup>9</sup>.

Rather than claiming that our language, as it stands, possesses the resources to translate any form of discourse, MacIntyre seems to believe that the best starting point for coming to understand any language-in-use is to understand it, at first, in its own terms and not in relation to our own. It is a process that he compares to the activity of anthropologists who go to live in another culture 'and transform themselves, so far as is possible, into native inhabitants'<sup>10</sup>. This is something that may be literally possible with cultures that still exist, but he also believes that it seems clear that when we have:

sufficient textual and other materials from a culture which no longer exists, those with the requisite linguistic and historical skills can so immerse themselves that they can become almost, if not quite, surrogate participants

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid. p380

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp380-381

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. p374

in such societies as those of fifth-century Athens or twelfth-century Iceland.<sup>11</sup>

Under these circumstances MacIntyre talks of the learner acquiring two first languages, the characteristic mark of which, is the ability to recognise those cases, such as that of Horace of first century Judaism, in which utterances in one language are untranslatable into the other'<sup>12</sup>.

However, by itself, this seems to explain how someone in the extraordinary position of having more than one first language could learn how to successfully follow the rules that are relevant in two completely separate language games, but it does not explain how they could be able to make meaningful links between such language games, unless they share more than MacIntyre seems so far to allow. MacIntyre's answer is to be found in his account of epistemic crisis and the possibility of using the resources of a previously alien tradition to enrich or radically transform another to solve such crises in a manner that can be justified by the existing problematic (see 3.4 above). Given what he has argued, this move will obviously require linguistic innovation, either through the importation of the terminology of another language, what MacIntyre terms 'same-saying', or through linguistic innovation in the transformed language much as the Greek language required in order to be capable of expressing the ideas of the Judaism in the *Septuagint*<sup>13</sup>. However, because of the close connection between traditions, languages and cultures, MacIntyre is also suggesting that such changes could require, not simply conceptual and linguistic innovation, but 'quite possibly social innovation too'<sup>14</sup>.

#### 4.2 Internationalised languages and barriers to understanding

When we turn to examine the possible task of translating into one of the internationalised languages of modernity, it may seem that the very form of such

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p375

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p372

<sup>14</sup> Ibid. p370

languages can solve the problems that he claims we encounter in translating between languages-in-use. As MacIntyre puts it:

it is characteristic of such [internationalised] languages that they are tied very loosely to any particular set of contestable beliefs but are rich in modes of characterization and explanation which enable texts embodying alien schemes of systematic belief to be reported on ...<sup>15</sup>

However, if internationalised languages can report on alien texts, then they do so 'in detachment from all substantive criteria and standards of truth and rationality', an approach that, at first sight, seems to avoid the problems faced by the language-in-use which must remain committed to substantive criteria that would render any translation 'unacceptable to those whose text it was or is'<sup>16</sup>.

However, it is this very detachment of language from substantive criteria of truth and rationality that, he believes, renders its translations problematic, since they end up by relegating the framework of shared commitments in the tradition's discourse to an explanatory appendage<sup>17</sup>. It is this distortion out of context that, just as with the works of Horace ends up producing a translation that would not, or could not, be accepted by speakers and writers of the original language-in-use<sup>18</sup>.

What we have, therefore, is the distinction between internationalised languages, where the apparent ability to translate any ideas is bought at the price of distortion, and tradition based languages-in-use that must be understood in the manner of an anthropologist and can only be translated into another language-in-use through linguistic and social innovation, justified with reference to the governing problematic. However, although this may seem to be a reasonable summary of what we have seen so far, it is not a distinction that MacIntyre himself maintains when it comes to *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*, a book that is

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p384

<sup>16</sup> Ibid

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. pp384-385

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p385

based on the Gifford Lectures that MacIntyre gave the year that *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* was published. Here, MacIntyre suggests, that Nietzschean genealogy and the Enlightenment beliefs of the writers of the Ninth Edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, lacked a neutral idiom for understanding one another and, instead, would systematically misunderstand one another's statements. He suggests that the remedy for this would be to follow MacIntyre himself in attempting to:

...learn the idiom of each from within as a new first language, much in the way that an anthropologist constitutes him or herself a linguistic and cultural beginner in some alien culture.<sup>19</sup>

The problem for understanding this passage in the light of what he seems to claim in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, is that, both of these perspectives are expressed within the internationalised languages of modernity and neither are tradition based perspectives expressed through a language-in-use. It is, therefore, very difficult to see why one has to engage in anything that is analogous to a work of anthropology to understand Nietzsche or Adam Gifford. The question we must now ask ourselves is, whether MacIntyre's general analysis of the possibilities for understanding others, is not similarly flawed.

MacIntyre suggests that the position of modernity is one in which the existence of untranslatability is hidden and may even appear to be so implausible that it is taken for a philosophical fiction<sup>20</sup>. This is achieved because our modern perspective rides roughshod over the context that gives meaning to the products of other cultures. He believes that this is demonstrated in the teaching of the history of art, where we bring together the very different and heterogeneous kinds of objects produced by other cultures under our concept of art, regardless of the meaning that they had to those who produced them<sup>21</sup>. He also argues that the

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<sup>19</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (London, Duckworth 1990) p43

<sup>20</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p385

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

approach to translation that is characteristic of modernity, generates a misunderstanding of tradition whose 'original locus' can be found in the introductory Great Books or Humanities courses of liberal arts colleges. Here, he claims, the 'complexities of linguistic particularity' are removed by translation into an internationalised language of modernity, allowing the student to sail through:

Homer, one play of Sophocles, two dialogues of Plato, Virgil, Augustine, the *Inferno*, Machiavelli, Hamlet, and as much else as is possible if one is to reach Sartre by the end of the semester.<sup>22</sup>

What the student gets is, what he terms, a tour through a museum of texts, 'each rendered contextless and, therefore, other than its original by being placed on a cultural pedestal'<sup>23</sup>.

However, the fact that we need to understand the context of Augustine or Shakespeare in order to understand their work is not in dispute by anyone. More to the point is to ask, whether we can really come to acknowledge difference and disagreement, unless we have some serious basis of understanding. MacIntyre does concede that there will always be something in common between any two languages, or any two sets of thoughts, but he downplays the full the implications of this point<sup>24</sup>. As Davidson observes, there is often something very paradoxical to the claims of theorists of conceptual schemes in this regard, as he points out:

Whorf, wanting to demonstrate that Hopi incorporates a metaphysics so alien to ours that Hopi and English cannot, as he puts it, 'be calibrated', uses English to convey the contents of sample Hopi sentences. Kuhn is brilliant at saying what things were like before the revolution using – what else? – our post-revolutionary idiom. Quine gives us a feel for the 'pre-individuative phase in the evolution of our conceptual scheme', while Bergson tells us

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid. pp385-386

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p386

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p371

where we can go to get a view of a mountain undistorted by one or another provincial perspective.<sup>25</sup>

In this context we have to observe that MacIntyre himself spends a large part of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* giving us a very detailed comparison of the conceptions of practical rationality of Homeric and classical Greece, the European middle ages, early modern Scotland and contemporary Western liberalism. Moreover, he does all this in late-twentieth century English, the foremost internationalised language of modernity.

A good way to illustrate this problem is through MacIntyre's own account of our understanding of the Homeric conception of the person, an account that seems to effectively undermine the more extreme claims that he makes elsewhere about the possibility of using modern English to understand others. In chapter 2 of *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* MacIntyre outlines the concept of *thumos* in Homer:

Someone's *thumos* is what carries him forward: it is his self as a kind of energy; and it is no accident that it comes to be used not only of the seat of someone's anger but of the anger itself. Passions such as fear or anger or sexual longing swell the *thumos* and lead to action, often of a destructive kind.<sup>26</sup>

MacIntyre focuses on the description, in Book I of the *Iliad*, of Achilles's reaction to Agamemnon's dismissive attempt to claim Achilles's prize, the slave woman Briseis. MacIntyre translates this for us as a situation where 'Achilles is poised for a moment between, on the one hand drawing his sword in order to kill Agamemnon, or on the other, curbing his *thumos*'<sup>27</sup>. He then goes on to look at three other translations of Homer's description of Achilles's mental conflict, including George Chapman's 1598 translation, as well as those of Alexander Pope (1715) and Robert

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<sup>25</sup> Donald Davidson 'On the Very Idea of a Conceptual Scheme' in *Inquiries into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1984) p184

<sup>26</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p16

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p17

Fitzgerald (1974). Summarising the different attempts to convey the meaning of the passage, MacIntyre comments:

Chapman had been educated at Cambridge and there would have had to read the *Nicomachean Ethics* in the high age of Renaissance Aristotelianism. So he ascribes to Achilles a “discursive part” and rival “thoughts” in his “mind.” According to Pope, Achilles is torn in eighteenth-century fashion between reason and passion. And Fitzgerald portrays Achilles in the psychological style of the present age as subject to alternating impulses of passion. Each translator uses an idiom familiar in his own time, the presupposition of whose use is some contemporary well-articulated account of the determinants of action and of the corresponding psychology imputed to the agent. Homer’s Greek, however, says nothing of discursive part or of reason vying with passion or indeed of any “passion of his heart” in a modern sense.<sup>28</sup>

MacIntyre’s comment on these different translations bears repeating in full:

There is, therefore, a crucial sense in which, although we can with the appropriate aids of philological and historical scholarship understand the Homeric poems, they cannot be translated even by a word-for-word rendering. For if these words are understood as words of contemporary English without gloss or paraphrase — and it makes no difference whether it is the contemporaries of 1598, those of 1715, or those of 1974 who are in question, or whether the language of translation is English, French, or German—they will often not mean what Homer’s words mean; and if those words are understood in their genuine Homeric sense, it is only by means of adequate gloss and paraphrase and not simply through those words.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid. pp17-18

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p18



But, whether we can perform a simple word for word translation of alien concepts is surely something that no one would wish to dispute with MacIntyre; after all, it is for this reason that the translation of poetry is always so problematic. More to the point, is the fact that he himself admits that we can *understand* the perspective of Homer, which means that, in effect, some sort of translation into modern English *is* possible. Or, to put it another way, what we need to be able to do to prove MacIntyre's account of conceptual schemes wrong is to successfully *interpret* others, we do not need to be able to provide word-for-word translations. Indeed, his location of the distortions inherent in Chapman, Pope and Fitzgerald, only make sense if such an understanding and interpretation is possible. Moreover, it is an act of understanding and translation that is performed through philological and historical scholarship, rather than some sort of quasi-anthropological exercise.

So to return to the case that we have seen MacIntyre develop, he claims that, because different traditions are distinct conceptual schemes arising from distinct communities, there are severe limits to the possibility of translation between them, except with the extraordinary act of empathy from those rare individuals who find some way of inhabiting two different conceptual schemes from the inside<sup>30</sup>. However, it *is* theoretically possible for a Jewish thinker of the first century BCE to understand Horace, or a modern English speaker to understand Homer with the aid of the right explanatory appendages. This fact undermines, in any important sense, the point that MacIntyre is making about the necessarily distorting effects of translation into both 'languages-in-use' and the internationalised languages of modernity.

Of course this does not mean that wide scale misinterpretation of others is not still possible, or indeed often likely. Take, for example, Bernard S. Cohn's account of how the British in seventeenth and eighteenth century India misconstrued the practices of the meetings between subordinates and rulers in the Mughal durbar. Cohn describes the durbar as fundamentally an act of ceremonial

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<sup>30</sup> See MacIntyre *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* (op cit) p113

incorporation of the subordinate into the body of the ruler, as *nazar* (in the form of gold coins) or *peshkash* (in the form of other valuables) was offered in exchange for *khelat* (ceremonial clothes, jewels, swords, shields etc.)<sup>31</sup>. This practice was seen by the British through the lens of the narrow utilitarian terms of trade and so misinterpreted as a fundamentally economic arrangement in which favours were bought, transforming *nazar* into 'bribery' and *peshkash* into 'tribute'<sup>32</sup>. Moreover this was an understanding that came to fundamentally change the nature of the *darbar* itself, when it was institutionalised in the form that such ceremonies took, as an instrument of British rule in the nineteenth century<sup>33</sup>.

The point, however, is that it is the distorting power of ideology that is the source of misinterpretation here, and not the inability of speakers of English (past or present) to understand the concept of symbolic incorporation short of an anthropological attempt to inhabit the role of a seventeenth century Indian. Mark C. Murphy suggests that MacIntyre's account of traditions is recognisably a 'successor concept' to the early focus on ideology in MacIntyre's work<sup>34</sup>. From what we have just seen, the concept of ideology may promise a more fruitful enquiry in understanding misinterpretation than that of traditions.

#### 4.3 Conceptual schemes and witchcraft beliefs

MacIntyre, therefore, cannot show us the existence of untranslatable alien conceptual schemes without, in effect, successfully translating them for us in the important sense of providing us with a successful interpretation. This leaves the theorist of conceptual schemes with two options, either we all inhabit conceptual schemes that prevent successful interpretation in a way that will always remain successfully hidden from us (a fairly empty form of scepticism), or we need to be presented with an alien way of thinking we simply cannot make sense of and must, instead, throw up our hands and admit that we are facing a scheme where

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard S. Cohn 'Representing Authority in Victorian India' in *The Invention of Tradition* edited by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1992) p168

<sup>32</sup> Ibid. p169

<sup>33</sup> Ibid. p172

<sup>34</sup> Mark C. Murphy 'Introduction' to *Alasdair MacIntyre*, edited by Mark C. Murphy (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2003) p8

interpretation is impossible. A useful example in this regard could be found in the debate over the interpretation of 'primitive' societies to which both MacIntyre and Peter Winch contributed during the 1960s.

Crucially this debate concerned the possibility of rational criticism of beliefs that were generated by an alien conceptual scheme, with Winch arguing for the self sufficient status of alternative accounts of rationality and MacIntyre, at this point in time, looking for ways in which the rational evaluation of others might be possible. Thus, in 'Understanding a Primitive Society', Winch asks us to consider the witchcraft beliefs of the Azande of north central Africa as set out by E. E. Evans-Pritchard. According to Evans-Pritchard the Azande believe that witchcraft is real and can either be detected by the work of an oracle, or by the post-mortem examination of a suspect's intestines for 'witchcraft substance' – a process that may well be initiated by the family of the deceased to clear the family name, since witchcraft is believed to be inherited<sup>35</sup>. The problem for our interpretation of their beliefs begins when we come to Evans-Pritchard's observation that, since a Zande clan is a group of persons related biologically through the male line, one case of witchcraft could implicate the whole clan, just as one case of someone being cleared of witchcraft would clear the clan<sup>36</sup>. However, when pressed on this point by Evans-Pritchard, the Azande refused to make this inference and did not regard their old beliefs about witchcraft to have become obsolete, indeed they showed themselves to have 'no theoretical interest in the subject'<sup>37</sup>.

Winch, who contributes to this debate as a thorough going defender of the incommensurability of conceptual schemes, argues that the problem that we have in making sense of the Azande's witchcraft beliefs arises when we take our beliefs as the starting point for interpretation, rather than the beliefs of the people we are studying. Since it seems that by starting off from our culture's commitment to forms of scientific enquiry, we fail to make sense of what the Azande believe,

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<sup>35</sup> Peter Winch 'Understanding a Primitive Society' in *Rationality* edited by Bryan R. Wilson (Basil Blackwell 1970) p91

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

Winch suggests instead that by attempting to judge them by these standards we are committing a category mistake<sup>38</sup>. Instead of attempting to push Zande thought 'where it would not naturally go', he believes that we must, instead, take into account the point which following a set of rules has in a given society<sup>39</sup>. If Zande witchcraft statements can have their own logic that renders them immune from scientific criticism, we have again come to a very clear statement of a separate and rationally incommensurable conceptual scheme.

One way in which we can hope to make sense of the Azande without imprisoning ourselves in the notion of conceptual schemes, would be to approach the task of interpreting their statements according to the principle of humanity. Inspired in large part by Davidson's case for the interpretive principle of charity, Graham MacDonald and Philip Pettit suggest that in coming to understand an alien language we would have to be able to understand, firstly, whether a statement in that language was syntactically well formed, secondly, what force it possessed (indicative, interrogative etc.) and, finally, the grasp of its semantic content that can be gained by understanding the state of affairs which is (normally) asserted in each indicative sentence<sup>40</sup>. Davidson's suggestion is that we follow the principle of charity in seeking the translation of the language under investigation that will maximise agreement between ourselves and those that we are seeking to translate. If we accept this strategy, then the walls of the conceptual schemes of Winch and the later MacIntyre do, indeed, come tumbling down and the suggestion, made earlier, that it is only on the basis of agreement that we can understand disagreement, is given centre stage. However, as MacDonald and Pettit observe, this principle cannot stand in its present form, since by advocating the maximisation of agreement in interpretation, it 'counsels neglect of considerations as to whether the interpretees are likely to have attained knowledge of the truths on which they are construed as agreeing'. Instead, the approach of the principle of

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid. p93

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. pp93-94

<sup>40</sup> Graham MacDonald and Philip Pettit *Semantics and Social Science* (London, Routledge 1981) p4

humanity is that we should minimise a certain sort of disagreement, that which we find unintelligible<sup>41</sup>.

If this is the case, we should seek to make sense of the statements made by the Azande by way of an understanding of the social conditions that prevent them from detecting contradictions in their thought about witchcraft that were apparent to Evans-Pritchard. In a well known article, 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science', Robin Horton suggests that we distinguish between societies that lack awareness of alternatives and treat beliefs as sacred, as opposed to those societies in which the kind of 'open' thought characteristic of modern science can take place<sup>42</sup>. However, MacDonald and Pettit suggest that it is from the oral, as opposed to literate, culture of people such as the Azande that we can come to make sense of what they are doing:

A literate society will be able to develop critical attitudes more reflectively and self-consciously insofar as predictions are written down and can be re-examined for error. Texts are available for careful scrutiny so that reading a text is more impersonal and, by implication, more 'objective' than listening to a speaker. One of the features associated with Horton's closed predicament - the tying down of words to occasions - is explained there by the fact that speech is tied to occasions in ways in which a text is not.<sup>43</sup>

Quoting Jack Goody, they conclude that 'traditional' societies are marked, 'not so much by the absence of reflective thinking as by the absence of the proper tools for constructive rumination'<sup>44</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p29

<sup>42</sup> Robin Horton 'African Traditional Thought and Western Science' in *Rationality* edited by Bryan R. Wilson (Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1970) p155. This is not however Horton's position in his later article 'Tradition and Modernity Revisited' in *Rationality and Relativism* edited by Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (Oxford: Basil Blackwell 1982). Here Horton responds to critics of the distinction between 'open' and 'closed' societies by conceding that 'the 'closed' / 'open' dichotomy is 'ripe for the scrap heap' (ibid. p226) in the light of more recent studies that reject the idea that 'traditionalistic' modes of thought represent the 'overwhelming brake on cognitive change that earlier observers judged it to be' (ibid. p218).

<sup>43</sup> Graham MacDonald and Philip Pettit *Semantics and Social Science* (London, Routledge 1981) p53

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

The need to make sense of Azande witchcraft beliefs does not, therefore, have to lead us in the direction of an account of conceptual schemes as they appear in the work of either Winch or in the tradition based perspective of MacIntyre. What we can say is that there are crucial watersheds across which interpretation is difficult, watersheds such as the rise of a literary, as opposed to oral, culture or the development of our modern conception of science. However, this does not exempt those who live before such transformations from rational evaluation on our terms, so long as we remain aware of the possibility for ideological blindness or chauvinism in our interpretation of others. On this point we might, therefore, grant something to MacIntyre's suggestion that successful interpretation may require social transformation. To explain the point of Evans-Pritchard's challenge to the Azande would, in effect, require that they experience the transformative effects of a literary culture, since the techniques of explanatory gloss that a modern academic can apply to Homer or a Hebrew speaking theologian could apply to Horace, will not be open to them. The question of whether there could be rational grounds for the Azande to enter into such a transformation is an interesting one – however, we have now seen that their case does not support the idea of a conceptual scheme and the failure of translation in anything like the sense required by MacIntyre's account of traditions.

#### 4.4 Human nature

We have, therefore, seen that even something as initially alien as the reasoning surrounding the witchcraft beliefs of the Azande does not support the idea that different people inhabit different conceptual schemes between which successful interpretation is impossible. Instead, radically different forms of belief and reasoning can be better understood on the basis of the principle of humanity, a principle that, as MacDonald and Pettit remind us, rests on a belief in 'the unity of

human nature'<sup>45</sup>. Indeed the abandonment of the idea of a conceptual scheme allows human nature to play a far more interesting role in our theorising.

From the perspective of the theorist of conceptual schemes, human nature cannot provide any kind of independent constraint on, or a source of critique for, the claims of a conceptual scheme. This, of course, is the position that MacIntyre takes in *A Short History of Ethics* where he denies that human nature can be a neutral standard by which we can judge different forms of social and moral life because:

each form of life carries with it its own picture of human nature. The choice of a form of life and the choice of a view of human nature go together.<sup>46</sup>

This position seems to be continued in *After Virtue* where MacIntyre stresses that, although his account of the place of the virtues is Aristotelian in the sense that it is teleological, it is 'happily' not Aristotelian in the sense of requiring allegiance to his metaphysical biology<sup>47</sup>. The teleological element is, instead, provided by the account of narrative and tradition that he was then to develop in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*.

However, talk of the unity of human nature can be interpreted in very different ways. In his discussion of Marx's views on human nature, Norman Geras suggests that we should distinguish between human nature in the sense of a 'constant entity' that is not part of the variety of history and the 'nature of man' that seeks to get to grips with 'the all-round character of human beings in some given context' which, whilst including anthropological constants, may be more or less variable<sup>48</sup>. David Hume, for example, seems to focus too exclusively on something like the former sense when he claims, in the *Enquiry Concerning Human*

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<sup>45</sup> MacDonald and Pettit *Semantics and Social Science* (op cit) p31. The principle of charity also assumes the unity of human nature as the basis for interpretation.

<sup>46</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (London, Routledge 1998) p259

<sup>47</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) p196

<sup>48</sup> Norman Geras *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London, Verso and NLB 1983) p24

*Understanding*, that 'Mankind are so much the same, in all times and places, that history informs us of nothing new or strange in this particular'<sup>49</sup>. The problem with such an approach is that, although it stands contrary to the spurious differences between world views invoked by theorists of conceptual schemes, it also ends up denying genuine diversity and imposes on others our own parochial assumptions. The master in this regard is obviously Aristotle who, as MacIntyre is keen to remind us in *A Short History of Ethics*, clearly saw all human diversity in terms of the normative standard of upper class Athenian life<sup>50</sup>.

By contrast, there is absolutely no reason why the appeal to human nature made by MacDonald and Pettit in connection with interpreting the Azande must rely on any such parochial standard. In such a case one could appeal to elements of both human nature and the nature of human beings without having to deny what was new, or (to us) strange in what we were encountering with the Azande. In short, to condemn theorising about human nature as in itself reflecting conservative or parochial tendencies, without distinguishing the different ways in which an appeal to human nature could be made, is not a convincing line of criticism.

When we come to relate what MacIntyre says about traditions to the study of the nature of human beings there is, however, an interesting twist in the story. It is not only in the work of MacIntyre's earlier Marxist humanism that we find human nature playing a role apparently freed from the distorting constraints of the dogma of conceptual schemes, but also in the most interesting of his post *After Virtue* works, *Dependent Rational Animals*. In the preface he announces that this work represents not only a continuation of his previous work, 'but also a correction of some of my earlier enquiries in *After Virtue*, *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and

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<sup>49</sup> David Hume *Enquiries Concerning Human Understanding and Concerning the Principles of Morals* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1975) p83

<sup>50</sup> MacIntyre *A Short History of Ethics* (op cit) p65



*Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry*'<sup>51</sup>. This correction concerns the way in which he conceives of human nature:

In *After Virtue* I had attempted to give an account of the place of the virtues, understood as Aristotle had understood them, within social practices, the lives of individuals and the lives of communities, while making that account independent of what I called Aristotle's "metaphysical biology." Although there is indeed good reason to repudiate important elements in Aristotle's biology, I now judge that I was in error in supposing an ethics independent of biology to be possible'<sup>52</sup>.

The implications that MacIntyre draws from this new found interest in human nature are twofold. Firstly, he believes that we need to understand how our biological nature informs 'goods, rules and virtues that are definitive of our moral life' and, secondly, he suggests that it is only by focusing on what we share with other animals that we can pay proper attention to the moral significance of human vulnerability and disability<sup>53</sup>.

Although MacIntyre presents this as both a continuity and a correction of his earlier work, it is obviously the element of correction that stands out most plainly in the light of the complete absence of any appeal to biology in his account of the development of traditions. One way to bring *Dependent Rational Animals* into line with the perspective of tradition would be to distinguish between two levels in MacIntyre's theorising, what Kelvin Knight terms, MacIntyre's first-order substantive theory of practical rationality and his second-order 'theory of theory' concerning the incommensurability of traditions<sup>54</sup>. However, MacIntyre's account, in *Dependent Rational Animals*, cannot simply be interpreted as a work from within the tradition of Thomist Aristotelianism in the manner required by his previous

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<sup>51</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999) p.x

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Kelvin Knight's editor's introduction to *The MacIntyre Reader* (op cit) p16

account of tradition, because of the role that it gives human nature as a basis of a critique of other traditions. As we have seen, he claims that traditions develop according to their own problematic developing out of a starting point in pure historical contingency so that, what is an important issue according to one problematic, may not be within the terms of discourse of another. MacIntyre does claim that the account he is giving of the implications of our 'animality, disability and vulnerability' comes from a specifically Thomistic perspective and that it does not, by itself, amount to a refutation of any rival perspective. However, he also crucially claims that animality, disability and vulnerability are something that other approaches *need* to acknowledge and MacIntyre 'invites' other traditions to show how they can take account of them regardless of whether their existing problematic is concerned with issues of dependency<sup>55</sup>.

Moreover, if we look carefully at *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, we can find a similar approach to the problems of liberalism. Immediately after stressing that liberalism (when transformed into a tradition) develops in terms of its own internal problematic, MacIntyre suggests that it requires that each person present him or herself 'as a single, well-ordered will' but then argues that such a form of presentation may be upset if it can be shown that it requires 'that schism and conflict within the self be disguised and repressed and that a false and psychologically disabling unity of presentation is, therefore, required by a liberal order'<sup>56</sup>. This is an interesting question but, just like the equally thought provoking discussion of *Dependent Rational Animals*, it seems to imply that there is more to the development of a tradition than a relation to its own problematic and that it may instead have to take account of human nature or, at least, human nature as historically modified in each epoch<sup>57</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals* (op cit) pp.xi-xii

<sup>56</sup> MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (op cit) p347. Of course MacIntyre could be claiming that the liberal order demands of people that they both present the self as a unity and that they organise their lives in a compartmentalised manner that contradicts this first demand, thus creating an issue that is purely internal to the liberal tradition. But even if this is what he is claiming here, and if it is he is being far from clear, such an interpretation is not possible of the claims of *Dependent Rational Animals*.

<sup>57</sup> Cf. Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One* translated by Ben Fowkes (London, Penguin 1976) p758

Interestingly, as stalwart a defender of the rational incommensurability of different conceptual schemes as Peter Winch, also seems to want to combine this position with an account of context of the human situation. On the one hand, Winch is happy to maintain that we cannot meaningfully claim that Zande witchcraft beliefs fail to match reality because judgments about reality are the product of our language and, in particular, the form of language game in which we are engaged<sup>58</sup>. On the other, and in the same essay, he also claims that we can identify 'limiting notions' that determine the 'ethical space' in life in all known human societies and that these include 'birth, death and sexual relations'<sup>59</sup>. The problem with this is that, as Ted Benton argues, understood entirely hermeneutically within the terms of different conceptual schemes, these things are not human universals because different cultures will all have a different way of interpreting and understanding these notions<sup>60</sup>. We can only mark out the 'ethical space' of the human life if we can accept such 'limiting notions' as a claim concerning the objective reality of the human situation<sup>61</sup>.

Drawing on MacIntyre's 1992 essay 'Colours, Cultures and Practices'<sup>62</sup> Knight seems to suggest that MacIntyre is likewise appealing to some such idea of limiting notions – although neither Knight nor MacIntyre expresses it in this terms. Knight seeks to explain MacIntyre's later position on morality through a comparison with his account of how standards of aesthetic appreciation are constrained by our biological nature, such as by the forms of perception made possible by physics and neurophysiology. Thus:

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<sup>58</sup> Winch 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (op cit) pp82-83

<sup>59</sup> Ibid. p107

<sup>60</sup> Ted Benton 'Wittgenstein, Winch and Marx' in *Marx and Wittgenstein: Knowledge, Morality and Politics* edited by Gavin Kitching and Nigel Pleasants (London, Routledge 2002) p157

<sup>61</sup> Ironically, Winch also manages to present us with a warning of the tendency to read our own parochial assumptions into our understanding of human nature when he focuses on masculinity and femininity as limiting notions that are crucial to our way of experiencing the world and yet neglects to give any reference to the social construction of gender roles. See Winch 'Understanding a Primitive Society' (op cit) p110

<sup>62</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Colours, Cultures and Practices' in *The Tasks of Philosophy: Selected Essays, Volume 1* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006)

It is not the case that these goods are simply given by and deducible from our nature, but culturally and historically specific understandings of goods are nonetheless constrained by a universal human nature. Reality limits incommensurability, and MacIntyre's ethics is now informed by a robust philosophical realism.<sup>63</sup>

However, this 'robust philosophical realism' can only work by opening up the terrain on which a broader understanding of the nature of human beings can be examined, again undermining from within, MacIntyre's commitment to traditions as incommensurable conceptual schemes.

#### 4.5 Conclusion

In chapters one and two we saw that moral criticism needs to be more than the assertion of an individual's will. However, in chapter 3 we also saw that, by the time that MacIntyre had come to write *After Virtue* and the subsequent works developing this perspective, the basis for practical reasoning that runs counter to the manipulation of others is to be found in practices and virtues that are undermined by proletarianisation. Thus, he suggests at one point, the handloom weavers had the basis for resistance up until the early nineteenth century that has not been available since<sup>64</sup>. However, as we also saw in chapter 3, MacIntyre does nothing to explain convincingly how his account is compatible with the long history of working class resistance since the handloom weavers. Neither can he support his belief that 'local' communities may have the ability to develop an alternative rationality in defiance of the overall social order that is impossible in the workplace or in any form of 'large-scale' politics. What we were left with, in the previous chapter, was the conclusion that, in the absence of any serious sociological support for his case, MacIntyre's pessimism could only be maintained on the basis that the moral resources of resistance are only available to those communities that can maintain a pristine tradition / conceptual scheme. This is a condition that is

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<sup>63</sup> Kelvin Knight *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge, Polity 2007) p201

<sup>64</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'The *Theses on Feuerbach* A Road Not Taken' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998) p232

obviously not that of the majority of the inhabitants of capitalist modernity, who live 'betwixt and between' combining elements from different traditions and often in a contradictory manner<sup>65</sup>. We have now, however, seen that such an account of traditions as self-enclosed conceptual schemes cannot be maintained. This opens up the possibility that a coherent world view can be developed through struggle and does not have to pre-exist as the precondition for resistance. There is, therefore, no reason why we can't return to the possibility raised at the end of section 3.2 and take Gramsci, rather than MacIntyre, as our starting point for understanding contradictory consciousness.

However, my enquiry into the nature of MacIntyre's traditions, in this chapter, has also thrown up the issue of how we are to understand claims about human nature, and it would be wrong to carry on without first saying something about this, given the importance that human nature has in developing a successful Marxist humanism. Another important conclusion to come from this chapter is that human nature cannot simply be relegated to a concept within a conceptual scheme, but, as I will now stress, this does not show that the ethics of opposition to capitalism can simply be generated by reference to a completely timeless account of what people are like or what they need.

When it comes to determining the 'goodness' of the roots of a tree or the rearing that a lioness gives to her cubs, it might seem quite easy to appeal to botanical and zoological accounts of the life cycle of the species in which flourishing can plausibly be cashed out in terms of survival and reproduction<sup>66</sup>. Thus, to approach such examples in terms of 'natural normativity', as Philippa Foot does, can seem more convincing than the philosopher who suggested to her that that for a tree to have 'good' roots was for it to possess the kind of roots that we would like to have if we were trees<sup>67</sup>. However, when we turn to human beings such 'natural normativity' seems to come adrift in the face of the wide diversity in models of the

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<sup>65</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London, Duckworth 1988) pp397-398

<sup>66</sup> Philippa Foot *Natural Goodness* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2002) p42

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.* pp25-26.

virtues and human flourishing presented by history. Thus, as MacIntyre observes in *After Virtue*, Homer's *aretai* could not count as virtues for us, anymore than they could for Aristotle, just as the virtuous upper class Athenian of Aristotle's *Nichomachean Ethics* would reject the kind of humility which is a key virtue for the writers of New Testament<sup>68</sup>. It would, therefore, seem that to claim that any one of these is more *natural* than the others invites a charge of parochialism from the relativist to which there is no easy response. So, although an understanding of human nature can play a role in understanding the actions of very different cultures, it is not a sound foundation for judging between different accounts of the good.

We would, however, be too hasty to dismiss the importance of human nature in our understanding of the good. In section 4.4 we encountered Geras's useful distinction between human nature as an unchanging entity and the nature of human beings that seeks to get to grips with 'the all-round character of human beings in some given context' which, whilst including anthropological constants, may be more or less variable. We also saw Winch's suggestion, somewhat ironic given his championing of conceptual schemes, that we can identify the 'limiting notions' that determine the 'ethical space' of a human life. I will now suggest that human nature can be important in our understanding of the good, both in the limits that it provides for human life, and in the continuing influence that it has on our cultural identity.

The point is that to only focus on the creation of human nature through culture, still less through the highly intellectualised account of culture given in MacIntyre's account of tradition, is as much of a mistake as the attempt to derive an ethics purely from a timeless human nature. The mistake of approaching human nature as simply a historical product is stressed by Terry Eagleton who suggests that a pure historicism:

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<sup>68</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp181-182

is in danger of overlooking the truth that much of what is most interesting about human beings springs from the fact that they are 'cusped' between nature and culture in a way which is both the source of their creativity and of their potentially hubristic self-undoing, and which renders inadequate any description of them pitched simply at either level.<sup>69</sup>

Thus, we may be inserted into the symbolic order of a 'specific historical culture', but Eagleton maintains, this may be 'a good deal more painful, partial and traumatic' than a pure historicism would allow. Moreover, he adds:

The fact that culture allows us to sit loose to the constraints of our species-being is what opens up history in the first place, but is also the *felix culpa* which plunges us into forms of crisis, tragedy and alienation mercifully closed to the non-labouring, non-linguistic animals.<sup>70</sup>

The fact that our culture exists in the context of an embodied human nature is something that MacIntyre seemed to have lost sight of in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?*, with the possible exception, that is, of his critique of the liberal account of the person as detailed in 4.4 above. However, we have also seen that this is exactly what he is starting to address in the important discussion of dependency and vulnerability in *Dependent Rational Animals*. In this work, accounts of the nature of the person within different traditions are found wanting by MacIntyre for failing to address the realities of the human condition, and not simply because they fail according to the purely internal standards of a conceptual scheme with its own problematic. In short, an account of human nature can give us

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<sup>69</sup> Terry Eagleton 'Self-Realization, Ethics and Socialism' in *New Left Review* 1 / 237 September – October 1999 p153. The target of Eagleton's critique here is the Hegelian Marxism of Sean Sayers in *Marxism and Human Nature* (Abingdon, Routledge 1998). In Sayers's defence it is important to note that he does acknowledge that the idea of human nature as a *tabula rasa* is 'self-contradictory' since even a blank slate must have 'such properties as will permit the acceptance of the chalk'. Sayers also approvingly cites Geras's defence of the existence of a concept of human nature, and goes on to argue that it is 'a fundamental tenet' of Marx's philosophy that human beings are 'material, biological beings, creatures with physical needs' See *ibid.* pp150-151.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.* pp153-154

an account of the moral space in which the cultural development of moral notions takes place.

However, just because the idea of human nature cannot be relegated to the terms of a particular conceptual scheme and does, indeed, have serious implications for our pursuit of the good, this does not mean that we need to neglect the idea of historical development in our understanding of the good. In 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' MacIntyre stresses that, if morality is to be intelligible, then we must be able to relate it to human needs and desires<sup>71</sup>. The key point is that such desires do develop historically and will not be the same in a capitalist social order as they were in previous social formations.

The rational kernel of MacIntyre's account of traditions is his judgment that claims about the good need not be undermined by their lack of timeless applicability and that we can justify the development of our ideas about how to live in terms of the contradictions and weaknesses of previous conceptions and attempts to live a good life. However, MacIntyre's perspective in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* cannot derive from this any extension of Marx's insights into the way in which our desires are both developed and thwarted by capitalist social relationships. Instead, MacIntyre presents us with a highly intellectualised account of traditions that seem to develop according to their own logic, a logic that is free of any messy engagement that might arise from its existence in a context defined by either the constraints of any particular social formation, or of the overall human condition.

The conclusion to the line of thought developed from chapters 2 to chapter 4 is, therefore, that *After Virtue* and the works that follow it cannot be said to provide a comprehensive and defensible alternative to MacIntyre's earlier Marxist perspective. However, as we saw in chapter 1, this earlier work provided an interesting overview rather than a comprehensive justification. In the next two

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<sup>71</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p58



chapters I will, therefore, turn to consider the problems that a more fully developed project might face. In chapter 6 I will consider whether an account that focuses on the satisfaction of desire can deal with the charge that our desires may require conflict with others, before moving on to look at the crucial question of whether Marxism can give an account that admits the diversity of things that we desire. But, before I do this, I need to consider whether any genuinely Marxist account can really be said to be compatible with a moral or humanistic critique. It is to this issue that I will now turn in chapter 5.



# Chapter 5

## Can there be a genuinely *Marxist* humanism?

My aim in this dissertation is to see whether the Marxist humanism of the younger Alasdair MacIntyre can provide resources that are adequate to the moral needs of resistance. However, I have yet to face the obvious criticism that, whatever else can be said in favour of the project that is outlined in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', it is not, in essence, a Marxist approach but, rather, that its humanist commitments run counter to the fundamental nature of Marx's own work. This is a challenge that I will here consider by way of the sophisticated anti-humanist Marxism developed by Louis Althusser from the 1960s onwards.

The classic defence of Marxist humanism against the anti-humanist challenge is, of course, to be found in E.P. Thompson's interesting, though flawed, polemic, 'The Poverty of Theory'. This essay was published in 1978, by which time MacIntyre had long since become disenchanted with Marxism and had, instead, relocated to the United States where he was in the process of writing *After Virtue*. However, even if MacIntyre himself had ceased to defend this position, Thompson's perspective in 'The Poverty of Theory' is similar enough to that of MacIntyre in the late 1950s to raise important issues for MacIntyre's work.

I will begin, in section 5.1, by tracing the relationship between humanism and reformism and between anti-humanism and Stalinism, arguing, in the process, that both Thompson and Althusser failed to understand the political commitments of their opponents. With this point out of the way, I begin, in earnest, by outlining their two rival accounts of the trajectory of Marx's thought. So, in section 5.2, I look at Thompson's account in which Marx realises the central problem of accounting for the

part object, part subject nature of human beings in *The German Ideology*, only to be imprisoned by the categories of political economy in his later works. Then, in section 5.3, I will turn to Althusser's interpretation in which Marx begins as an explicitly humanist thinker, who wins through to a truly scientific anti-humanism in the mature works such as *Capital*, a claim whose textual authority has been crucially undermined by the rediscovery of Marx's *Grundrisse*.

I begin the evaluation of these different cases, in sections 5.4 and 5.5, by rejecting Althusser's anti-humanist case. Thus, in section 5.4, I will argue that a truly consistent anti-humanism would fail as a socialist theory because it undermines the very evaluative discourse that can be the basis for some of our most important actions and so, resolves itself into a form of pure contemplation unconnected to action. In section 5.5 I continue this attack by arguing against Althusser that we can only adequately understand human beings if we accept some aspect of the 'irreducible specificity' of human phenomena that he sought to reject. I will argue that, although this approach cannot be made to fit with some significant things that Marx wrote, it is a route that we need to take if we want to be true to his insights in his third thesis on Feuerbach.

With Althusser out of the way, I turn my attention, in section 5.6, to the problems that exist in Thompson's socialist humanism. Thus, Thompson may highlight Marx's insight about the part subject and part object nature of human beings, however, I will argue that his emphasis on approaching human beings through their own self-understanding fails to appreciate the way in which social structures can restrict human action and fails to find a place for such crucial notions as ideology and false consciousness. I will suggest that this is also a charge that can be directed at some, but not all, of MacIntyre's work. Finally, in 5.7, I will criticise Thompson's continuing failure to theorise the nature of the Soviet Union and to get to grips with the inter-relation of economic and ideological factors.

## 5.1 Preliminaries: humanism and reformism, anti-humanism and Stalinism

In their work of the late 1950s both Thompson and MacIntyre saw their accounts of humanism as opposed to the crude rationalisations of a Stalinist ruling class and its apologists, rather than any kind of theoretically sophisticated anti-humanism. However, it is just such an anti-humanism to which Thompson had to relate his work, when he sought to restate the case for socialist humanism in the 1970s. A clear statement of the disagreement between humanists and anti-humanists (at least in relation to debates amongst Marxists) is given by Kate Soper:

*Humanism*: appeals (positively) to the notion of a core humanity or common essential features in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood, thus (negatively) to concepts ('alienation', 'inauthenticity', 'reification', etc.) designating, and intended to explain, the perversion or 'loss' of this common being. Humanism takes history to be a product of human thought and action, and thus claims that the categories of 'consciousness', 'agency', 'choice', 'responsibility', 'moral value' etc. are indispensable to its understanding.

*Anti-humanism*: claims that humanism as outlined above is pre-scientific 'philosophical anthropology'. All humanism is 'ideological'; the ideological status of humanism is to be explained in terms of the systems of thought or 'consciousness' produced in response to particular historical periods. Anthropology, if it is possible at all, is possible only on condition that it rejects the concept of the human subject; 'men' do not make history, nor find their 'truth' or 'purpose' in it; history is a process without a subject.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (London, Hutchinson and Co. 1986) pp11-12

Already, therefore, we have a statement, not only of the positive content of anti-humanism, but a critique of the claims of humanism that categorises them as the ideological antithesis of a truly scientific knowledge of human beings.

In the following sections I shall consider Thompson's polemical response to the claims of anti-humanism in 'The Poverty of Theory', as well as looking, in more detail, at the substance of Althusser's critique of humanism. Before we come to this, we first need to consider the relation of these approaches to the Stalinism which the first New Left had sought to criticise. For Thompson there is a direct continuity between Stalinism and the later anti-humanism, with Althusser representing a developed and coherent expression of an outlook that Stalin, being a mixture of 'Marxist theorist, pragmatist, and hypocrite'<sup>2</sup>, failed to carry to its conclusion. Indeed for Thompson, Althusser's work represents a kind of Stalinist 'ideological police action'<sup>3</sup>. For Althusser, on the contrary, anti-humanism was most definitely not a defence of Stalin, but rather a critique of *both* Stalinism and what he saw as the reformist and right leaning tendencies of humanism.

At this point we need to appreciate the changes that had taken place in the discourse of 'humanism' during this period. For Althusser, writing in the 1960s, his criticisms of 'humanism' were directed much more at the leaderships of the Soviet and French Communist Parties than the humanist rebels of 1956. Whereas Thompson and other Marxist humanists in the late 1950s had been condemned by official communism<sup>4</sup>, the twenty second congress of the C.P.S.U. declared, in 1961, that the class struggle had ended in the Soviet Union and that, in consequence, the dictatorship of the proletariat had been replaced with a 'state of the whole people' that would

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<sup>2</sup> E. P. Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory or An Orrery of Errors' in *The Poverty of Philosophy and Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p141

<sup>3</sup> Ibid. pp135-136

<sup>4</sup> see ibid. p 129

build communism under the guidance of the humanist slogan 'Everything for Man'<sup>5</sup>. From Althusser's perspective, this official endorsement of humanism went hand in hand with Moscow's abandonment of the leadership of the class struggle internationally, in favour of a policy of peaceful coexistence with the capitalist world<sup>6</sup>. For Althusser's Parti Communiste Français (PCF) 'humanism' also proved to be a perfect ideological vehicle for its electoralist ambitions in the 1960s. As G. M. Goshgarian puts it:

The need to win over socialist and Catholic voters, especially from the then burgeoning white-collar strata, was thought to mandate both doctrinal and organizational change. It would be necessary, in particular, to stress the commonalities between Marxist and progressive non-Marxist thought, advocate a peaceful, gradual, parliamentary transition to socialism, and lift, wherever possible, the bureaucratic constraints still imposed on the Communist thinkers and artists.<sup>7</sup>

It may well be that Althusser's anti-humanism fails to properly address the challenge that Stalinism presented to post-war Marxist thought. However, Thompson's suggestion that he is mounting some kind of 'ideological police action' on behalf of Stalinist orthodoxy, does not sit well with either Althusser's treatment of Stalin or his struggles with the PCF leadership<sup>8</sup>. As Goshgarian suggests, it was Roger Garaudy with his version of Marxist humanism, who was the PCF's 'official philosopher' in the run up to the Party's debate on humanism in the mid sixties, and it was Waldeck Rochet, the

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<sup>5</sup> Louis Althusser 'To my English Readers' in *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London, NLB 1977) p11

<sup>6</sup> see G. M. Goshgarian 'Introduction' to *Louis Althusser: The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* edited by François Matheron translated by G. M. Goshgarian (London, Verso 2003) pxiii

<sup>7</sup> Ibid. pxxv

<sup>8</sup> Thompson does state in his 'Afterword' to 'The Poverty of Theory' that Althusser's criticisms of the leadership of the French Communist Party after the 1978 election could show that 'In certain of these judgments I may be ill-informed. It is possible, even, that Althusser may prove to be more serious in his new-found anti-Stalinism than I suppose. Let us hope that this is so. But if he is to be so, then he must revoke the greater part of his own published theory. And this is what *The Poverty of Theory* is about.' Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p210

Party General Secretary, who declared that the aim of the PCF was 'to fight for the most consistent humanism possible'<sup>9</sup>.

However, although these considerations may undermine the notion of Althusser undertaking some kind of police action on behalf of the Communist hierarchy, they also show up the limits of his engagement with Marxist humanism. Of course, it is perfectly possible for the post-Stalin Soviet ruling class to use 'humanist' rhetoric as ideological cover for a bureaucratic and manipulative reality, but by itself, this tells us nothing about humanism. Any account of this reality would have to come to terms with the humanism of the rebellion of 1956 not just the 'humanism' of Khrushchev. As Thompson comments in 'The Poverty of Theory':

I do not know who first revived "socialist humanism" as the motto of the Communist Libertarian opposition in 1956, although certainly *The New Reasoner* carried it to some parts of the English-speaking world. But it arose simultaneously in a hundred places, and on ten thousand lips. It was voiced by poets in Poland, Russia, Hungary, Czechoslovakia; by factory delegates in Budapest; by Communist militants at the eighth plenum of the Polish Party; by a Communist premier (Imre Nagy), who was murdered for his pains. It was on the lips of women and men coming out of gaol and of the relatives and friends of those who never came out.<sup>10</sup>

But what if Althusser had engaged in this larger reality, would he have been able to provide useful evidence of a rightwing bias to humanism as such? Perry Anderson has suggested that it would be wrong to deny all justice to Althusser's characterisation of socialist humanism and that, although there is no 'simple ideological fatality' that inevitably leads socialist humanist in simple rightward

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<sup>9</sup> Goshgarian 'Introduction' to *Louis Althusser: The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* (op cit) pxxvi

<sup>10</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p130



direction, as he concedes that the case of Thompson and John Saville clearly shows, he still maintains that there are 'limits and weaknesses' in this position that permit even if they do not dictate one<sup>11</sup>. In this context he asks us to consider the enthusiasm for the Young Marx amongst non-Marxist and even Christian writers, or the rightward trajectory of Leszek Kolakowski from Marxist humanist in 1956 to his later status as 'the Koestler of the 70s'<sup>12</sup>. To this list he also adds Alasdair MacIntyre, who he mocks for his 'Anglican devotion', and indicts for having 'ended up in the pages of *Encounter* and *Survey*'<sup>13</sup>.

The problem with this line of argument is that, whatever critical distance Anderson is attempting to put between his own criticisms and Althusser's, he still gives too much credence to Althusser's accusations and fails to locate what can be genuinely problematic about humanism. Humanism can act as a support to reformism when it abstracts from class relationships in the name of a common humanity that is merely imagined to have escaped from really existing human relations. Thus, Marx observes that the English newspapers condemned the Chartists for ignoring common humanity by pitting class against class, just as the victorious bourgeoisie of the French July revolution of 1830 sought to outlaw the incitement to class struggle 'probably also out of 'humanity''<sup>14</sup>. However, if humanism were to be advanced within a robust and realistic account of capitalist relations, the danger of reformism would be absent. We have already seen, in chapter one, that such an analysis is attempted by MacIntyre in his earlier work, work which, as I have already suggested (and which I shall suggest again below in 5.6) can usefully correct some of the limitations of Thompson's humanism.

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<sup>11</sup> Perry Anderson *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, Verso 1980) p109

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid. p108

<sup>14</sup> Karl Marx 'Moralizing Criticism and Critical Morality' in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p217

Reflecting on this point, one can observe that it is unfortunate that Anderson is prepared to give a balanced and sympathetic treatment of Thompson, even on points of which he is highly critical, but is prepared to portray MacIntyre in the form of a misleading caricature. Whatever else may be said of the evolution of MacIntyre's work after his disengagement with, and eventual rejection of, Marxism, his direction has, most decidedly, not been a move to the right in the sense of a Koestler or a Kolakowski. We have now seen that long after his rejection of Marxism, MacIntyre remains a critic of capitalist modernity, even if that criticism is now expressed within the context of an account of tradition based enquiry and an opposition to 'large-scale politics' that, as we saw in chapters three and four, requires strong criticism. Moreover, the fact that MacIntyre, perversely, chose to publish some of his articles in *Encounter*, both during and after his time in the International Socialists, cannot by itself be taken as evidence of a right-wing deviation – he neither 'ended up' there, nor published anything within its pages that suggested his acceptance of Cold War American liberalism.

Humanism, in short, does not have to be treated as the ideology of bureaucratic reformism, although its use for this purpose in Althusser's somewhat narrow field of vision, should make us think carefully before we link his rejection of humanism too closely with Stalinism. Getting these misconceptions out of the way allows us to see more clearly what is really at stake when we ask whether a specifically *Marxist* humanism is a tenable position. In order to do this we must begin at the most basic level, by looking at the different accounts that Thompson and Althusser give of Marx's own approach to this problem.

## 5.2 Thompson's Marx

Interpretations of what constitutes the core, the guiding thread, of Marx's work have widely differed since his death. As David McLellan reminds us, the straightforward image of Marx, dominant in the Second International, was that of a

great economist who foresaw the inevitable collapse of capitalism. This was a picture that was challenged, first by the Hegelian Marxism of Lukács and Korsch, and then, most profoundly, by the rediscovery of Marx's early works in the 1930s. These may have taken time to reach a wide audience, but when they did, opinion tended to divide between those who praised the young 'humanist' Marx for the insights that he failed to pursue (and perhaps even betrayed) in his later 'scientific' work and others who accepted the dualism of the Younger Marx and the Mature Marx and instead, like Althusser, gave their approval to what they took to be the anti-humanist perspective of *Capital*<sup>15</sup>. However Thompson does not fit neatly into this schema, since he combines his humanist perspective and his criticism of the later Marx with the opinion that Marx is at his best, not in the pages of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*, but rather in such works as *The German Ideology*, a book which, as we shall see, is one of the very places identified by Althusser as constituting Marx's break with humanism.

If Thompson praises Marx for successfully producing a first draft of a valid historical materialism in *The German Ideology*, he is equally clear that he failed to develop the insights of this work as his subsequent intellectual development is distorted by the wrong turn that he takes in the 1850s, when he becomes 'trapped' within the categories of Political Economy<sup>16</sup>. For Thompson, the roots of much that is mistaken in later forms of Marxism can be located in the way that Marx becomes entangled in the very premises of Political Economy that he was attempting to critique, in the process creating a kind of 'anti-structure' that shares Political Economy's weaknesses and omissions. This proved to be misleading because the premises of the political economists could not give any kind of total account of society, only a narrow and distorting focus on the economic:

[t]hese premises proposed that it was possible not only to identify particular activities as "economic", but to isolate these as a special field of study from the

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<sup>15</sup> David McLellan 'Introduction' to *Marx's Grundrisse* (St Albans, Paladin Books 1973) p13

<sup>16</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p59

other activities (political, religious, legal, “moral” – as the area of norms and values was then defined – cultural etc.); where such isolation proved to be impossible, as in the impingement of “politics” or “law” upon “economic” activity, then such impingement might be seen as improper interference with “natural” economic process or as second-order problems, or as the fulfilment of economic goals by other means.<sup>17</sup>

Thompson adds that the trap was never fully closed and that Marx remained capable of thinking about capitalism in genuinely historical (and one might add non-reductive) terms but, in spite of Engels’ attempts in his later letters to avoid a reductive account of the superstructure, there was enough raw material in the Marxist tradition for Althusser to draw on as he attempted to thrust it back into a determinist prison<sup>18</sup>.

As Thompson sees it, what we need to do is to follow the insights that Marx had before his entrapment in political economy and to base our enquiry on the recognition of the ‘part subject, part object’ nature of human beings<sup>19</sup>. The division that he wishes to draw is between the kind of vision of structuralist Divine necessity that he attributes to Althusser and William Morris’s conception of ‘ever-baffled and ever-resurgent’ human agents. On this account history is not, as Althusser claims, a process without a subject<sup>20</sup>, but is best understood as ‘unmastered human practice’<sup>21</sup>. People do, therefore, make their own history but, as Marx famously reminds us in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, not under conditions chosen by themselves<sup>22</sup>. The goal of Marxist utopianism is, therefore, to increase human freedom by gaining some

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid. p60

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. p68

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. p88

<sup>20</sup> Louis Althusser ‘The Humanist Controversy’ in *The Humanist Controversy and Other Writings* edited by François Matheron translated by G. M. Goshgarian (London, Verso 2003) p282

<sup>21</sup> Thompson ‘The Poverty of Theory’ (op cit) p103

<sup>22</sup> Karl Marx ‘The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte’ in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p300

measure of control over the social structure that we create and inhabit. As Thompson puts it in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski':

communism is the society in which things are thrown from the saddle and cease to ride mankind. Men struggle free from their own machinery and subdue it to human needs and definitions. Man ceases to live in a defensive posture, warding off the assault of "circumstances", his furthest triumph in social engineering a system of checks and balances and counter-vailing powers against his own evil will. He commences to live from his own resources of creative possibility, liberated from the determinism of "process" within class-divided societies.<sup>23</sup>

In order to maintain this vision and protect it from Marx's later errors, Thompson even suggests, in 'The Poverty of Theory' at least, that we should seek to practice in a *Marxist* tradition without allowing it to become a *Marxism*, a term that he had come to reject as indicating obscurantism and vulgar economism<sup>24</sup>.

### 5.3 Althusser's Marx

Later in this chapter I will come back to consider how well Thompson delivers on his Marxist humanist project of acknowledging the part-subject / part-object nature of human beings and what he could have learnt from MacIntyre in developing this idea. Before this, however, we need to consider Althusser's alternative interpretation of the development of Marx's thought.

Althusser accepts that Marx began his work from within a humanist theoretical framework, or problematic as he terms it. Indeed, he suggests that there are two identifiable stages in the development of this humanism, the first of which is a liberal-

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<sup>23</sup> E. P. Thompson 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p363

<sup>24</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p168

rationalist humanism in which the essence of man is freedom, the second of which follows on from his adoption of Feuerbach's conception of man as a 'communal being'<sup>25</sup>. In the first chapter we saw MacIntyre develop a humanist account of Marx that stresses the centrality of freedom and reason in understanding human nature which, he claims, can be traced back through Marx to Hegel. Althusser, however, has a very different perspective. For him, social criticism conducted from the perspective of the man of freedom-reason, owes more to Fichte and Kant than it does to Hegel, indeed the Hegel of Althusser's 'The Humanist Controversy' is one that can be accurately described as suggesting that history is a process without a subject since it is based on the alienation of Spirit and not of 'Man'<sup>26</sup>. It is Feuerbach who takes the Hegelian account of alienation and places it into a humanist framework and so makes history the story of Man's alienation<sup>27</sup>. From this perspective, Althusser argues, that the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are still a fundamentally Feuerbachian piece of work, with Marx extending Feuerbach's theory of Man and alienation from its original focus on religion to include politics and the economy.<sup>28</sup>

However, Althusser believes that Marx could not remain the humanist of the Early Works if he was to truly get to grips with the nature of human social formations, because he believes that the ideological nature of this position represents a theoretical impasse that precludes a genuinely scientific understanding. Indeed, Althusser claims that the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* are 'theoretically speaking, one of the most extraordinary examples of a total theoretical *impasse* that we have'<sup>29</sup>. The recognition of the theoretical impasse of humanism is, Althusser claims, first highlighted in 1845 with Max Stirner's critique of Feuerbach's humanism as a form of religious ideology in *The Ego and His Own*, a claim that Althusser tells us 'deeply

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<sup>25</sup> Louis Althusser 'Marxism and Humanism' in *For Marx*, translated by Ben Brewster (London, NLB 1977) pp223-226

<sup>26</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p239

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. p241

<sup>28</sup> Ibid p247

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p251

affected' Marx and Engels and which is, he believes, 'hard to refute'<sup>30</sup>. Crucially what this ideology did, Althusser argues, was to prevent the humanist Marx from achieving the central materialist thesis of the epistemological unity of all the sciences, because it leads to the notion of the 'irreducible specificity' of the form of intelligibility of 'human phenomena' which, Althusser suggests, is to be understood as 'spiritualism's defence of the religious privilege of the Nature and Destiny of Man'<sup>31</sup>.

Althusser argues that, by 1845, Marx had begun to reject the humanist perspective and was, instead, beginning to find a route out of the impasse by developing an account of history based around the concepts of the forces and relations of production, rather than the idea of a human essence<sup>32</sup>. Althusser, therefore, terms the *Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology* the 'Works of the Break'. These are the works in which a new problematic is introduced that breaks with humanism, albeit in a 'partially negative and sharply polemical and critical form'<sup>33</sup>.

If we are to look for evidence of a conceptual break within these works themselves we do, however, encounter some serious difficulties. This is something that we can see when we turn to the *Theses on Feuerbach*, in particular in the sixth thesis where Marx makes an explicit statement about 'human nature'. Here he states that:

Feuerbach resolves the essence of religion into the essence of *man*. But the essence of man is no abstraction inherent in each single individual. In its reality it is the ensemble of the social relations.

Feuerbach, who does not enter upon a criticism of this real essence, is hence obliged:

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p258

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p281

<sup>32</sup> Althusser 'Marxism and Humanism' (op cit) p229

<sup>33</sup> Althusser 'Introduction: Today' in *For Marx* (op cit) p34

1. To abstract from the historical process and to define the religious sentiment by itself, and to presuppose an abstract – *isolated* – human individual.
2. Essence, therefore, can be regarded only as “species”, as an inner, mute, general character which unites the many individuals *in a natural way*.<sup>34</sup>

How does Althusser deal with a work that he has identified as signalling Marx’s break with humanism? Althusser’s reading of this passage in ‘Marxism and Humanism’ is that it should be interpreted as the rejection of two theses, (1) the notion of a universal essence of ‘man’, and (2) that this essence is the attribute of ‘*each single individual*’ who is its real subject.’<sup>35</sup> However, the immediate problem with this interpretation is that in the second sentence Marx does not seem to be denying the notion of a human essence at all, but rather challenging Feuerbach’s attempt to locate it as an abstraction inherent in each individual, an abstraction, moreover, that neglects the importance of its social and cultural expression. Marx does go on to say in the third sentence that ‘in its reality’ it is the ensemble of social relations, but this, by itself, does not prove that he was seeking to develop a form of historical materialism that has abandoned human nature. This point is made by Norman Geras in his meticulous examination of the Sixth Thesis, where he suggests, contrary to any interpretation that holds that Marx is dissolving human nature into the ensemble of social relations:

if I maintain that, contrary to some misconception or other about it, in its reality the fascist ethos is Auschwitz, Dachau, Treblinka, and so on, I am not thereby disputing its reality, attempting to dissolve it; as I almost certainly would be the reality of human benevolence if I so identified that. Rather, I am affirming it, by signalling in what it is to be found: its characteristic features or most notorious results or fullest expression.<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* from *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p157

<sup>35</sup> Althusser ‘Marxism and Humanism’ (op cit) p228

<sup>36</sup> Norman Geras *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (London, Verso and NLB 1983) p56



To claim that Marx intends us to take his comments about human nature as disputing its reality would, as Geras suggests, mean that we were already convinced that Marx has an undermining and ironic intent<sup>37</sup>. Since the Sixth Thesis seems to either fail to support Althusser's agenda and can quite reasonably be interpreted as contradicting it, it is no surprise that Althusser ends up claiming in 'The Humanist Controversy' that this supposed 'Work of the Break' is 'literally incomprehensible and necessarily so'<sup>38</sup>.

Althusser seems to believe that he is on firmer ground with *The German Ideology*, a work that he claims 'attests to and locates' the break in Marx's work with the declaration that he and Engels are seeking to 'settle accounts with our erstwhile philosophical conscience'<sup>39</sup>. However, in truth, the problems that he has in justifying the idea of a profound break in Marx's thought, continue in the context of this larger and less elliptical work. It is certainly correct to say that *The German Ideology* represents a clear rejection of idealism and with it the Young Hegelian claim that the chains and limitations present within human relationships are simply the product of human consciousness, a form of consciousness that can be removed by putting to people 'the moral postulate of exchanging their present consciousness for human, critical or egoistic consciousness'<sup>40</sup>. It is also true to say that, in seeking to distance themselves from this perspective, Marx and Engels express themselves in a way that could have anti-humanist implications when they suggest that one cannot understand human beings by taking the manner in which they imagine or conceive themselves to be as the starting point, just as they are also prepared to describe the realm of the ideological as a 'reflex' or 'echo' of other more fundamental processes<sup>41</sup>.

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid. pp56-57

<sup>38</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p254

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. p32 He does add that the declaration by itself is not proof but represents a proposition that must be 'examined, and falsified or confirmed' (ibid.)

<sup>40</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *The German Ideology* edited and with introduction by C. J. Arthur (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1974) p41

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p47

However, as Althusser himself admits in 'The Humanist Controversy', the perspective of *The German Ideology*, in fact, maintains the perspective of the human subject<sup>42</sup>. The fundamental process that takes priority at this point is not a process without a subject but, rather, the real-life process of 'real, active men'<sup>43</sup>. It is also a work in which the task that is set for individuals is to ensure their free development by 'replacing the domination of circumstances and of chance over individuals, by the domination of individuals over chance and circumstances'<sup>44</sup>. In this light it is, therefore, not difficult to see why Thompson was keen to praise this work as the first draft of a valid historical materialism that examined the part-subject, part-object nature of human beings. It is also no surprise that, as Geras reminds us, the real active human beings of *The German Ideology* are described in the context of an anthropology of the 'enduring imperative of essential human needs', whether these be social, sexual, or the need for the free and all round development of the individual<sup>45</sup>.

Althusser attempts to explain away the obvious incompatibility of much of the real content of *The Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology* with this notion of 'Works of the Break' by suggesting that, since it is impossible to break with the theoretical past in one blow, it is often the case that old words and concepts must be re-enlisted and stand in for new concepts that are still in training<sup>46</sup>. This is far from convincing, but what he is in effect saying is that if we simply read these works themselves, we will never be able to understand what Marx is doing and that we can only confidently identify them as the beginning of a new direction, once we are able to identify the reality of Marx's mature anti-humanist position. This is a position which Althusser believes required 'Long years of positive study and elaboration' after 1845, before Marx could 'produce, fashion and establish a conceptual terminology and

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<sup>42</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p260

<sup>43</sup> Marx and Engels *The German Ideology* (op cit) p47

<sup>44</sup> Ibid. p117

<sup>45</sup> Geras *Marx and Human Nature* (op cit) pp70-73

<sup>46</sup> Althusser 'Introduction: Today' in *For Marx* (op cit.) p36

systematics that were adequate to his revolutionary theoretical project'<sup>47</sup>. Althusser states that the production of this new conceptual vocabulary took place in, what he terms, the 'Works of Marx's Theoretical Transition' which he dates between 1845 and 1857<sup>48</sup>. It is only with the first drafts of *Capital* (later known as the *Grundrisse*) of 1857-8 that we finally come to Marx's Mature Works. Althusser argues that, by this time the categories of 'Theoretical Humanism' ('Alienation', 'the Subject' and 'Man') had disappeared from Marx's thought with the exception of 'a few isolated and isolatable, and in any case highly localized, survivals'<sup>49</sup>. In place of these things we have the achievement of a mature a-humanist position, a position that Althusser also terms *anti-humanist*, to stress the irreconcilability of this position with the humanist position that he believes has been waging an assault on Marx's greatest theoretical achievements since the discovery of the Early Works<sup>50</sup>.

Althusser's Marx, is not, therefore, the Marx of the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts* nor of *The German Ideology*, but the Marx of the preface to the first edition of *Capital*, who states that 'individuals are dealt with here only in so far as they are the personifications of economic categories, the bearers [*Träger*] of particular class-relations and interests'<sup>51</sup>. As Althusser sees it, we have, in the Mature Works, returned to Hegel's process without a subject, albeit in a materialist rather than an idealist form. From this perspective it is not that individual human beings have been expunged from real history, only that the humanist concept of 'Man' has been expunged from *theory*<sup>52</sup>.

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid. p34

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p263

<sup>50</sup> Louis Althusser in Louis Althusser & Étienne Balibar *Reading Capital* translated by Ben Brewster (London, Verso 1997) p132

<sup>51</sup> Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy: Volume One* translated by Ben Fowkes (London, Penguin 1976) p92

<sup>52</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p264

The problem is that Althusser has at least as great a task in depicting Marx's 'Mature Works' as consistently anti-humanist, as he had in locating any genuine evidence of an epistemological break in *The Theses on Feuerbach* and *The German Ideology*. *Capital* may, in many ways, be a work in which individuals are dealt as personifications of economic categories, but it is also a work in which Marx still has a lot to say about anthropology. Sometimes this can be manifested in a strikingly obvious way, such as the extended footnote in chapter 24 of volume one, where Marx criticises Bentham, not for assuming that there is a human nature, but for failing to examine its historical basis and arbitrarily assuming 'with the driest naiveté' that 'the English petty bourgeois' was the sole expression of that nature. Thus:

To know what is useful for a dog, one must investigate the nature of dogs. This nature is not itself deducible from the principle of utility. Applying this to man, he that would judge all human acts, movements, relations, etc. according to the principle of utility would first have to deal with human nature in general, and then with human nature as historically modified in each epoch.<sup>53</sup>

Moreover, as Geras reminds us, *Capital* continues the analysis of essential human needs that was to be found in *The German Ideology* including the need for:

food, clothing, shelter, fuel, rest and sleep; hygiene, 'healthy maintenance of the body', fresh air and sunlight; intellectual requirements, social intercourse, sexual needs in so far as they are presupposed by 'relations between the sexes'; the needs of support specific to infancy, old age and incapacity, and the need for a safe and healthy working environment<sup>54</sup>

However, the most impressive evidence that Marx is continuing to employ key elements of the humanist viewpoint, is the importance of alienation in the very work

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid. pp758-759

<sup>54</sup> Geras *Marx and Human Nature: Refutation of a Legend* (op cit) p83

that Althusser identifies as the beginning of Marx's mature works, the *Grundrisse der Kritik der Politischen Ökonomie* of 1857-1858. Often described as the first rough draft of *Capital*, the *Grundrisse*, in fact, gives us an outline of far wider scope<sup>55</sup>. Crucially for our purposes, Marx demonstrates in this work his continuing concern with alienated labour, whose productivity goes to produce objects and values 'which stand opposed to it in an alien and authoritarian personification' and which are endowed with strength 'as opposed to the abstract purposeless, purely subjective poverty of labour power'<sup>56</sup>. He goes on to suggest, contrary to Adam Smith's assumption, that it is the cessation of labour that is synonymous with liberty and happiness, that an individual may require a normal portion of work and that 'The result is the self-realization and objectification of the subject, therefore real freedom, whose activity is precisely labour'<sup>57</sup>. Finally, he also uses the *Grundrisse* to return to his earlier theme concerning capitalism's domination of the subject by the power of things. He thus argues against the assumption that free competition in the market can be the final development of human liberty, because it is only free development on the limited foundation of the domination of capital, just as the freedom of Roman law was freedom under the domination of the emperor:

This kind of individual liberty is thus at the same time the most complete suppression of all individual liberty and total subjugation of individuality to social conditions which take the form of material forces – and even of all-powerful objects that are independent of the individuals relating to them.<sup>58</sup>

Althusser's account of the development of Marx's thought can, therefore, be met with some very serious objections. But so too must Thompson's accusation that it was from Marx's '*Grundrisse* face' that Althusser 'extracts his textual licences of

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<sup>55</sup> McLellan's introduction to *Marx's Grundrisse* (op cit) p19

<sup>56</sup> Karl Marx *Grundrisse* quoted from *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p367

<sup>57</sup> Ibid. p368

<sup>58</sup> Ibid. p372

authority'<sup>59</sup>. Marx does sometimes describe human consciousness in a manner that is uncongenial to the humanist perspective, for example, as an echo, or reflection of material processes, an element of his thought that, again uncongenially to Thompson, he expresses in Thompson's preferred Marxist work *The German Ideology*<sup>60</sup>. He is also ready to state his hostility to moral criticisms of capitalism. However, he also demonstrably maintains an anthropology and a concern with alienation right into his later 'mature' economic writings and does so in a way that cannot be simply swept away as an isolated recurrence of an earlier theme. If we are to make sense of Marx's work, and more importantly, if we are to advance a defensible form of *Marxism*, we need to be able to identify what constitutes Marx's most important insights and what aspects we must reinterpret or ignore.

#### 5.4 Why a truly consistent anti-humanism would fail as a socialist theory

In chapter one (section 1.1) we saw Hanson's suggestion that, although there is a clearly identifiable socialist-humanist strand in both the Marxist tradition as a whole and Marx's work in particular, they are nothing more than a 'foreign body, constantly setting up irritation' rather than a crucial part of the theoretical structure<sup>61</sup>. Althusser mistakenly claimed that Marx had largely abandoned or, at the very least, sidelined this element in his later work, however it would still be open to him to claim that, even if he had not, then the task is left for Marxists such as himself to complete the master's work. Thus, instead of taking Marx at the letter of his work, we should engage in a 'symptomatic reading' which 'divulges the undivulged event in the text it reads'<sup>62</sup>. Althusser does, in fact, claim that Marx himself did not fully complete the theoretical revolution that his work demands, he:

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<sup>59</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p163

<sup>60</sup> Marx and Engels *The German Ideology* (op cit) p47

<sup>61</sup> Harry Hanson 'An Open Letter to Edward Thompson' in *The New Reasoner* Autumn number 2 (1957) p80

<sup>62</sup> Althusser in *Reading Capital* (op cit) p29

did produce in his work the distinction between himself and his predecessors, but — as is the fate of all inventors — he did not think the concept of this distinction with all the sharpness that could be desired; he did not think theoretically, or in an adequate and advanced form, either the concept or the theoretical implications of the theoretically revolutionary step he had taken.<sup>63</sup>

So how would a truly anti-humanist Marxism develop? Crucially, and as we have now seen, quite unlike Marx himself, it would of course need to eliminate the central categories of humanist thought, such as ‘consciousness’, ‘agency’, ‘choice’, ‘responsibility’, ‘moral value’ and so on, as ideological. In doing this Althusser maintains that, although these ideological notions may be inescapable, and thus possess their own kind of objective necessity, the humanist treatment of them as the foundation of enquiry is incompatible with a truly scientific understanding of history as a process without a subject. Thus, in ‘Marxism and Humanism’, he depicts ideology as a ‘relay’, the element through which class societies manage consciousness and settle ‘the relation between men and their conditions of existence’ to the profit of the ruling class<sup>64</sup>. However, if ideology is indispensable, it is not simply a component of class societies, but also an organic part of every social totality:

Human societies secrete ideology as the very element and atmosphere indispensable to their historical respiration and life. Only an ideological world outlook could have imagined societies *without ideology* and accepted the utopian idea of a world in which ideology (not just one of its historical forms) would disappear without trace, to be replaced by science.<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid. p134

<sup>64</sup> Althusser ‘Marxism and Humanism’ (op cit) pp235-236

<sup>65</sup> Ibid. p232

In this case, ideology would continue to exist in a socialist society, acting here again as a relay, but now one in which 'the relation between men and their conditions of existence is lived to the profit of all men.'<sup>66</sup> In short:

it is clear that *ideology (as a system of mass representations) is indispensable in any society if men are to be formed, transformed and equipped to respond to the demands of their conditions of existence.*<sup>67</sup>

Althusser's alternative to humanism's foundational account of the subject is continued at greater depth in 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses'. Here Althusser sets himself the task of answering how the reproduction of existing conditions of production is achieved. For example, the reproduction of labour power requires that it receives both the means of physical subsistence and also that the worker's skills are formed and developed. However:

the reproduction of labour power requires not only a reproduction of its skills, but also, at the same time, a reproduction of its submission to the rules of the established order, i.e. a reproduction of submission to the ruling ideology for the workers, and a reproduction of the ability to manipulate the ruling ideology correctly for the agents of exploitation and repression, so that they, too, will provide for the domination of the ruling class 'in words'<sup>68</sup>

This reproduction of submission is achieved by, what Althusser calls, the 'Ideological State Apparatuses' (ISAs), apparatuses that clearly require a functionalist understanding of the nature of the state that is far broader than the stress on the mean of coercion or repression in either Weberian or traditional Marxist accounts. The ISAs include:

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<sup>66</sup> Ibid. pp235-236

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p235

<sup>68</sup> Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* translated by Ben Brewster (London, NLB 1971) pp127-128



- the religious ISA (the system of the different churches),
- the educational ISA (the system of the different public and private 'schools'),
- the family ISA
- the legal ISA,
- the political ISA (the political system, including the different parties),
- the trade-union ISA,
- the communications ISA (press, radio and television, etc.),
- the cultural ISA (literature, the arts, sports, etc.).<sup>69</sup>

Amongst these ISAs, Althusser places the school and the family as the most crucial for the reproduction of societal norms in capitalist societies, a role that is played by the Church and family in pre-capitalist societies.

Taking this analysis to the very heart of humanism, he argues that the notion of the subject is the 'constitutive category' of all ideology, indeed the term 'ideological subject' is a 'tautological proposition'<sup>70</sup>. Thus, for Althusser, we can only be subjects through ideology, something that he develops in his account of the interpellation of the subject. As he puts it:

I shall then suggest that ideology 'acts' or 'functions' in such a way that it 'recruits' subjects among the individuals (it recruits them all), or 'transforms' the individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) by that very precise operation which I have called *interpellation* or hailing, and which can be imagined along the lines of the most commonplace everyday police (or other) hailing: 'Hey, you there!'<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. pp136-137

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p160

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. pp162-163

In this story the individual thus becomes a subject through its metaphorical 'turning around', its recognition that it was really him or her that is being called. This, of course, is just a story, since Althusser is clear that, instead of the tidy sequence that he describes, 'individuals are always-already interpellated by ideology as subjects'. Even before its birth, the child is 'always-already a subject', 'appointed' as a subject 'in and by the specific familial ideological configuration in which it is 'expected' once it has been conceived.'<sup>72</sup>

However, now that this account is more fully developed, its inadequacies are plain to see. The first problem is that what we are being offered is an extreme form of the dominant ideology thesis in which the ISAs play an immensely powerful role over the human subjects who inhabit a given social formation. Thus, with the exception of a minority of deviant subjects who incur the sanctions of the repressive state apparatus:

the vast majority of (good) subjects work all right 'all by themselves', i.e. by ideology (whose concrete forms are realized in the Ideological State Apparatuses). They are inserted into practices governed by the rituals of the ISAs. They 'recognize' the existing state of affairs (*das Bestehende*), that 'it really is true that it is so and not otherwise', and that they must be obedient to God, to their conscience, to the priest, to de Gaulle, to the boss, to the engineer, that thou shalt 'love thy neighbour as thyself', etc. Their concrete, material behaviour is simply the inscription in life of the admirable words of the prayer: '*Amen – So be it*'.<sup>73</sup>

However, the degree of acceptance of the dominant ideology, that such an account presupposes of subordinate social classes, is scarcely credible compared to Gramsci's analysis of the contradictory consciousness exhibited by subordinates in the

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p164

<sup>73</sup> Ibid. p169

capitalist social order<sup>74</sup>. Indeed, in its confidence of the overwhelming power of the dominant ideology, Althusser's account of the ISAs can seem, at times, to be worryingly close to the kind of complacent functionalism that Thompson finds in non-Marxist western sociological writing of the time<sup>75</sup>. Here the 'social system' plays an almost omnipotent role, using the value system to regulate social integration with any evidence of apparent systematic dysfunction or challenge to the norms, is explained away as a safety valve, a functionally useful means for the release of tension. That this cannot serve as a useful general model for human societies should be readily apparent from the rich record of system threatening conflict and fundamental evaluative disagreement. Althusser has not given us any compelling reason why we should not take seriously the case of those who have stressed the pervasive element of scepticism and ideological disengagement in reaction to the dominant ideology.

Most fundamentally, however, there is the problem of the status of evaluative discourse and moral criticism in Althusser's Marxism. Althusser does not, of course, deny that the ISAs are open to challenge since they are, after all, the site of conflict between contending classes. Thus he himself gives as the example of the conflict between the aristocracy and rising bourgeoisie in France over the power of the Catholic Church<sup>76</sup>. However, although he accepts that conflict can be real, he is committed to denying that any set of values can be shown to be genuinely better, or to allow a truer fulfilment of 'human nature' than any others. His account of moral criticism can, therefore, take one of two directions. He could claim that such criticism ultimately remains trapped within the dominant ideology of the existing ISAs, which is essentially what he believes the fate of humanism to be – a contention whose hollowness was demonstrated by the radical project of socialist humanism outlined in chapter one. Alternatively, he could maintain that moral criticism can be advanced against the dominant ideology in the name of another class that is contending for

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<sup>74</sup> Antonio Gramsci *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* edited by David Forgacs (New York, New York University Press 2000) pp325-326

<sup>75</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) pp76-77

<sup>76</sup> Louis Althusser 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses' (op cit) p18

power, such as the use of the discourse of equality, freedom and reason by the rising bourgeoisie of the eighteenth century in its conflict with feudalism<sup>77</sup>.

The problem here is, essentially, to understand why people should be motivated to action by moral criticism of the existing ISAs, if we take Althusser's account of the transition between different social formations as our starting point. If we accept what Althusser says, then it is difficult to see how any social system can truly be said to be superior to any other. It is simply the case that feudal society constitutes one kind of subject, capitalism another and socialism (if it comes to pass) yet another. Socialist struggle within capitalism is not without pain and sacrifice, so we might reasonably ask why we should engage in such activity if we are doing so simply for the sake of change and not in order to liberate a human subject that can meaningfully be said to find expression or frustration in different forms of life. As we have seen, Althusser does suggest that socialism is the state of affairs where the conditions of existence 'are lived to the profit of all men' but to say that a state of affairs will 'profit' every human being is surely an evaluative claim – there must be something about the state of affairs that is better than capitalism or feudalism. As we have seen in the last section, Althusser argues, that anti-humanism does not mean that 'men, individuals, and their subjectivity have been expunged from real history', only that the humanist concept of 'Man' has been expunged from theory<sup>78</sup>. However, the humanist response would be that he is, in fact, offering us an account of the subject and ideology that undermines the understanding of human beings required by their subjectivity in real history, most importantly, he undermines the very evaluative discourse that can be the basis for some of our most important actions. Just as with the emotivism that we encountered in chapter 2, we have another example of a theorist failing to think through the implications, not only of their theory being true, but of such a theory being widely believed to be true.

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<sup>77</sup> Althusser 'Marxism and Humanism' (op cit) pp234-235

<sup>78</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p264

Matters may not be as simple as this makes it seem. Althusser must, of course, assume that there is some political significance to our scientific understanding if we are to make sense of his accusations about the danger of a rightward deviation in Marxist humanism – but, as we have also seen, he does not treat the ideological view point of the subject as something that can be transcended, even within a socialist society. It is not, therefore, his goal to undermine evaluative discourse at the level of the subject and its activity, he aims, instead, to give us a different scientific account of human beings. What, therefore, is the political significance of this scientific understanding? One could argue that it acts as a bulwark against the right leaning tendencies of humanist theory, but we have already seen that such accusations are based on a misunderstanding of the political possibilities of humanism that generalises far too readily from the use of humanism by official communism in the 1960s. Alternatively, we could follow John Mepham's suggestion that the truth behind Althusser's account is that it is the masses, and not individual men and women by themselves, who make history, a truth that socialists will lose sight of if they allow themselves to become fixed upon the humanist stress upon reasons and intentions<sup>79</sup>. However, as Kate Soper observes, it is difficult to understand how attempting to convince individual people of their impotence is a sound political strategy<sup>80</sup>. In short, if Althusser's scientific understanding is not to undermine socialist activity, it is difficult to see how it can be raised above the level of pure contemplation unconnected to action.

### 5.5 Socialism, humanism and ethics

A common criticism of Marxism is that it attempts to reduce all other phenomena to aspects of fundamental economic processes, in short, the straw man position of 'crude Marxism' that is assumed by many anti-Marxist critics and was defended by apologists for Stalinism. Against this position we find Engels (in his much quoted 1890 letter to Bloch) denying that the materialist conception of history holds that the economic is the only determining factor in making history, just as he admits

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<sup>79</sup> John Mepham quoted in Kate Soper *Humanism and Anti-Humanism* (op cit) pp106-107

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

that both he and Marx had sometimes laid more stress on the economic side 'than is due to it' in their struggle to emphasise the importance of economic factors against their adversaries who denied them any role<sup>81</sup>. Interestingly, this is also a problem of which Althusser is well aware and of which he gives a nuanced account of the complexity of the relationship between different factors and levels in the historical process that he sets out in his essay 'Contradiction and Overdetermination'<sup>82</sup>.

However, the very fact that Althusser could give an interesting response to the issue of crude Marxism and yet fail so completely to get to grips with his account of the role of the ethical, shows us we are dealing with a problem that runs deeper than the distortions of Stalinist thought. To understand this point we need to return to the comment that we saw Althusser make in 'The Humanist Controversy' (see 5.3 above), where he suggests that the young Marx's humanism prevented him from achieving, what Althusser describes as, the central materialist thesis of the 'epistemological unity of all the sciences', because it leads to the notion of the 'irreducible specificity' of the form of intelligibility of 'human phenomena'<sup>83</sup>. The problem here is that, contrary to the assumption that underlies Althusser's anti-humanism, one could attempt to map the interrelationship of different aspects of human reality, both the material and the mental, without taking such a reductive attitude to human agency and moral decision making. Indeed, there is a fundamental sense in which we need to maintain the irreducibility of an important aspect of 'human phenomena', if we are to be true to its nature. This is a point that Charles Taylor makes (although not specifically in the context of any debate about Marxism) in *Sources of the Self*, where he suggests that the notion that our language of good and right is not real, comes from the 'the great

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<sup>81</sup> Friedrich Engels 'Engels to J. Bloch In Königsberg' (1890)  
[http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90\\_09\\_21.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1890/letters/90_09_21.htm)

<sup>82</sup> See Louis Althusser 'Contradiction and Overdetermination: Notes for an Investigation' in *For Marx* (op cit)

<sup>83</sup> Althusser 'The Humanist Controversy' (op cit) p281

hold of natural science models on our entire enterprise of self-understanding in the sciences of human life'<sup>84</sup>. But, as he argues in response:

What we need to *explain* is people living their lives; the terms in which they cannot avoid living them cannot be removed from the explanandum, unless we can propose other terms in which they could live them more clairvoyantly. We cannot just leap outside of these terms altogether, on the grounds that their logic doesn't fit some model of "science" and that we know a priori that human beings must be explicable in this "science". How can we ever know that humans can be explained by any scientific theory *until* we actually explain how they live their lives in its terms?<sup>85</sup>

To argue otherwise and to neglect human phenomenology is, he suggests, to fail to give an explanation and instead, quoting Donald Davidson, to engage in simply 'changing the subject'<sup>86</sup>.

Another way of bringing out the inadequacy of an entirely reductive account of human agency is to consider the difference that it offers between the explanation that it offers me of other people's behaviour and the explanations that I have to give of my own. Thus, Taylor argues, that the proponents of a reductive theory may congratulate themselves on explanations of human behaviour which do without the terms current in human life, such as 'freedom' or 'dignity', but:

Suppose I can convince myself that I can explain people's behaviour as an observer without using a term like 'dignity'. What does this prove if I can't do without it as a term in my deliberations about what to do, how to behave, how

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<sup>84</sup> Charles Taylor *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989) p56

<sup>85</sup> Ibid. p58

<sup>86</sup> Ibid. p58

to treat people, my questions about whom I admire, with whom I feel affinity, and the like?<sup>87</sup>

To adopt the purely reductive analysis is, therefore, to fall foul of the thrust of Marx's observation in the third thesis on Feuerbach concerning materialist theories which focus only on the transformation of others by changing their circumstances. Such an approach seems to exempt the would be educator of humanity from his or her own analysis of the condition of others and so end up by dividing 'society into two parts, one of which is superior to society'. Marx contrasts this with the task of developing an understanding of the 'coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self-changing'<sup>88</sup>.

In order to follow through with the project implicit in Marx's third thesis, we must, therefore, reject what Althusser says about the relationship between morality and ideology. However, it also means that we will have to break with significant elements in the thought of Marx and Engels themselves. So, for example, such an analysis will be able to find no place for the language that Marx and Engels employed in their rejection of idealism in *The German Ideology* where they lump together 'Morality, religion, metaphysics' with 'all the rest of ideology' that no longer retains 'the semblance of independence' in the face of the materialist method<sup>89</sup>. We will also have to reject Marx's famous comment, in *The Civil War in France*, that the working class 'have no ideals to realise'<sup>90</sup>, just as we question Marx's tendency to deny that capitalism should be criticised in terms of its injustice or unfairness<sup>91</sup>.

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid. p57

<sup>88</sup> Karl Marx *Theses on Feuerbach* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p156

<sup>89</sup> Marx and Engels *The German Ideology* (op cit) p47

<sup>90</sup> Karl Marx *The Civil War in France* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p545

<sup>91</sup> See Norman Geras 'The Controversy and Marx and Justice' in *New Left Review* I / 150, (March-April 1985)



The task of developing a socialist moral theory and that of advancing an adequate exegesis of the thought of Marx may, therefore, diverge to some extent, since it is possible to locate aspects of Marx's thought that are not similarly congenial to the humanist project and instead seem to undervalue the possibilities of moral discourse. It is, of course, possible to argue, as Paul Blackledge does, that Marx's official hostility to morality should be taken as simply a critique of morality understood as an 'abstract imperative to action'. In this case it is, then, possible to reposition Marx as a consistently ethical thinker who accepts the reality of human agency and the place of (virtue) ethics within it<sup>92</sup>. However, even if this interpretation cannot be sustained, and a real contradiction remains in Marx's work<sup>93</sup>, or at least, a real failure to appreciate what is valid in 'moral' obligations, this does not mean that the project of an adequate Marxist account of the moral resources of resistance is impossible. Even if we must diverge from the work of Marx himself, there is every reason to see ourselves as still operating within the Marxist tradition if in so doing so we are getting to grips with the part subject / part object nature of human beings.

## 5.6 Why humanism needs to recognise the influence of structure

However, even though I believe that there are convincing reasons to take moral agency seriously and so develop a form of Marxist humanism, closer examination of Thompson's work reveals a problem with this project, a failure to get to grips with the importance of structure which mirrors Althusser's failure to acknowledge human subjectivity. It is, moreover, a problem with which MacIntyre wrestled in his work of the 1960s and to which, I shall now argue, he gave a far better account than Thompson himself proved capable of giving.

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<sup>92</sup> *Marxism and Ethics: Freedom, Desire and Revolution* (Albany, State University of New York Press 2012) p46

<sup>93</sup> This is of course Norman Geras's conclusion. Geras argues that the problem with Marx is his hostility to the explicit elaboration of social ethical theory that prevented him from adequately dealing with this topic. See Norman Geras 'The Controversy About Marx and Justice' in *New Left Review* I / 150, March-April 1985 p62

Thompson's goal, as we have now seen, is to develop an account of human beings as part object and part subject, in short, as agents who are 'ever-baffled and ever-resurgent'. His ideas about how this approach should be theorised can be clearly seen when we turn to the analysis of class and class consciousness in *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). At the very beginning of the preface Thompson tells us that he chose the title because the study of class formation is the study of an active process that owes as much to agency as it does to conditioning. Thus, 'The working class did not rise like the sun at an appointed time. It was present at its own making'<sup>94</sup>. With this in mind, he argues that 'class' should not be understood as 'structure', or as even as a 'category', but as something that happens within human relationships:

class happens when some men, as a result of common experiences (inherited or shared), feel and articulate the identity of their interests as between themselves, and as against other men whose interests are different from (and usually opposed to) theirs.<sup>95</sup>

Thompson thus accepts that certain material conditions are crucial to the emergence of class consciousness, as he puts it in 'The Poverty of Theory' – class formations 'arise at the intersection of determinism and self-activity'<sup>96</sup>. However, he is also very clear that class can only be understood with reference to the intentions and self-understanding of the participants. Thus, to seek to understand class as a 'thing' without reference to this conscious element, for example, simply as the relation that certain human beings have to the means of production, is a distortion. Crucially this is a distortion that turns the working class into an 'it' whose correct class consciousness and interests are deducible by the Marxist theorist from the historical situation, with the theorist free to regard any disagreement between this picture and the actual class

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<sup>94</sup> E.P. Thompson *The Making of the English Working Class* (London, Penguin 1968) p9

<sup>95</sup> Ibid. pp9-10

<sup>96</sup> Thompson *The Poverty of Theory* (op cit) p106

consciousness of the working class, as nothing more than the product of the inefficient ways in which the truth dawns within the 'ideological superstructure'.

What are we to make of this? One way into this debate is to note that at the time Thompson was writing it was not only socialist historians who wished to stress the importance of human beings' self understanding in the interpretation of their behaviour, but also a great many analytic philosophers who had been inspired by the school of philosophical psychology that arose from Wittgenstein's later work<sup>97</sup>. As we saw above, Althusser argued that humanist commitments prevent Marxism from achieving the epistemological unity of all the sciences and put in their place the 'irreducible specificity' of the intelligibility of human phenomena. It was precisely this irreducibility that these philosophers sought to uphold. For example, Peter Winch in his classic exposition of this perspective in *The Idea of a Social Science*, argues that it is not simply the complexity of human actions and interactions that constitutes the crucial difference between the social and the natural sciences, but rather the fundamental conceptual difference between reasons for actions and the search for patterns of cause and effect in the succession of events:

As Wittgenstein says, someone does not offer his reason as evidence for the soundness of his prediction of future behaviour – rather he is justifying his intention. 'His statement is not of the form: 'Such and such causal factors are present, therefore this will result; nor yet of the form: 'I have such and such a disposition, which will result in my doing this'; it is of the form: 'In view of such and such considerations this will be a reasonable thing to do'.<sup>98</sup>

This line of thought is brought out nicely by Philip Pettit and Graham MacDonald when they summarise this approach as one which treats action explanation as, in reality, a

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<sup>97</sup> For example: Peter Winch *The Idea of a Social Science and its Relation to Philosophy* (London, Routledge 1990) and G. E. M. Anscombe *Intention* (Oxford, Blackwell 1963)

<sup>98</sup> Winch *The Idea of a Social Science* (op cit) p81

form of redescription of the kind which we perform when we seek to fit an unfamiliar object into a familiar pattern<sup>99</sup>. To ask for the reason for an action would, therefore, be comparable with someone who asked why the box in the corner had a glass front to which they received the reply that it was a television set<sup>100</sup>.

MacIntyre is obviously influenced by this Wittgensteinian analysis during the period of his closest engagement with Marxism in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This is most clearly brought out in his 1962 essay 'A Mistake About Causality in Social Science'. His, by now familiar, starting point is that something can only qualify as a action, rather than a mere physical movement, if it can be treated as part of a socially established and recognised practice inseparable from the beliefs of human beings<sup>101</sup>. He then goes on to take the crucial next step and argue that, since actions depend upon beliefs and socially recognised practices, the actions that you are capable of performing depend upon the 'stock of descriptions' available in a given society. He, therefore, states that an agent 'can only do what he can describe'<sup>102</sup>. Just as with Winch, we again have an analysis that insists upon the irreducible difference between the understanding of human beings and the understanding of the natural sciences. Just as with Thompson, what we have, hopefully, also gained in the process, is also an understanding of human beings that is incompatible with the perspective of the administrator surveying and manipulating their human raw material and which leads us instead to a project of human self-emancipation<sup>103</sup>.

The first thing to note about this way of defending the status of human agents is that it, arguably, leaves them trapped within the terms of the conceptual scheme which they inhabit. Thus it becomes impossible to ask whether there really are any

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<sup>99</sup> Graham MacDonald and Philip Pettit and *Semantics and Social Science* (London, Routledge 1981) p88

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. pp88-89

<sup>101</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'A Mistake About Causality in Social Science' in *Philosophy, Politics and Society* edited by Peter Laslett and W. G. Runciman (Oxford, Basil Blackwell 1962) p57

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. p59

<sup>103</sup> Kelvin Knight *Aristotelian Philosophy: Ethics and Politics from Aristotle to MacIntyre* (Cambridge: Polity 2007) p113

witches, rather than to enquire whether the notion of witchcraft is meaningful within the terms of our present conceptual scheme. As MacIntyre was later to point out in his debate with Winch, once we have adopted this position, we have nothing to say to someone at a time of transition when modes of thought that accept witchcraft are employed within the same communities as modes that have no place for it. If claims about witchcraft only make sense within a conceptual scheme, then we have no answer to the inhabitant of seventeenth century Scotland, or twentieth century Africa, who wants to know, not simply whether a certain outlook employs the concept of witchcraft, but whether there really are any witches<sup>104</sup>.

This 'Wittgensteinian' position is clearly stated by Winch when he argues that the social scientist is only justified in using a concept that is not taken from the forms of activity under investigation if they arise from an understanding of concepts that are actually used. Thus, he suggests, an economist might use the term 'liquidity preference', even if it is not used directly in business discourse, if it arises from, is presupposed by, the concepts that business people actually employ<sup>105</sup>. When such language games are disputed, there must, by implication, be nothing rational to say to those who are caught between two perspectives. What is missing here is the possibility that the introduction of a new set of concepts that do not arise from people's actual usage could illuminate their social relationships in a new manner that they themselves could come to see was rationally superior. As we saw in chapter 3, this is an insight that is partially developed in MacIntyre's later account of the possible resolution of epistemic crises, but, as we also saw, it is promptly undermined by his mistaken account of the failure of interpretation between schemes. However, if we follow my argument in chapter 4, we can say that, even if the later MacIntyre follows Winch in having nothing to say to those who live 'betwixt and between' pristine, self-enclosed conceptual schemes, there is no reason for us to follow him.

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<sup>104</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'The Idea of a Social Science' in *Against the Self-images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 1978) p228

<sup>105</sup> Winch *The Idea of a Social Science* (op cit) p89

So, the problem with the suggestion that we base our understanding of others entirely on their self-understanding is that 'our' concepts might help them to understand their situation better than 'they' are presently able to. Crucially, what is missing from someone's self-understanding may be an understanding of the ways in which our lives can be structured and determined independently of our will or our self-understanding. As Perry Anderson observes, Thompson must be mistaken in making class consciousness the hallmark of class formation, however applicable it may be in the remarkable case of the English working class, because to do so excludes, from the parameters of class analysis, a wide variety of groups such as Athenian slaves, lower castes in medieval India, or workers in Meiji Japan, who had no conception of class consciousness, but to whom a class based analysis may fruitfully be applied<sup>106</sup>. In short, Thompson's one sided emphasis on the conscious understanding of the participants, prevents him from making a crucial distinction between a class-in-itself and a class-for-itself, a mistake that will end up being replicated by any account like that of MacIntyre, in 'A Mistake About Causality in Social Science', that explains actions purely in terms of the stock of descriptions in an available conceptual scheme.

If we are truly to realise Thompson's stated aim of coming to grips with the part object, part subject nature of human beings, we need a way of understanding how we can be moved to action by both our own reasons and by other causes. The most obvious way of integrating both intentional explanation and the claims of structure would be to reject the Wittgensteinian philosophical psychology of Winch and to treat reasons as a form of causal explanation that can be placed alongside other causes in our analysis of behaviour. This is the very move made by MacIntyre in 'The antecedents of action' (1966) and 'The Idea of a Social Science' (1967).

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<sup>106</sup> Perry Anderson *Arguments Within English Marxism* (London, Verso 1980) p40

In 'The antecedents of action' MacIntyre rejects the notion that our actions are always caused by 'acts of will' and goes on to ask whether, in their absence, actions lack causes altogether<sup>107</sup>. Against those philosophers who have sought to dispense with causal explanations, he cites, as evidence, the highly specific alterations of behaviour that can be correlated with the taking of certain drugs, as well as studies suggesting the existence of a hereditary element in criminality<sup>108</sup>. Developing this line of reasoning in 'The Idea of a Social Science', MacIntyre suggests that we need to distinguish between an agent having a reason for performing an action and the agent being actually moved to act by having such a reason<sup>109</sup>. This can be illustrated most dramatically in the case of post-hypnotic suggestion where a subject is caused to perform an action, such as leaving the room at the certain time, but who explains the action in terms of a reason, such as needing fresh air, or deciding to catch a train<sup>110</sup>. This raises the question of whether the possession of a reason could not be the cause of action in the same way as the hypnotic suggestion. It also undermines the argument of those who seek to deny that a reason can be a cause on the grounds that the knowledge that I have of my own reasons for action is infallible in a way that my knowledge of causal relationships is not.

It is, of course, impossible to thoroughly make the case for reasons as causes without the addition of a hefty new chapter that would take us far from the main thread of this work. What I can say, at this point, is that of the four justifications against treating reasons as causes identified by Donald Davidson in his 1963 essay 'Actions, Reasons and Causes'<sup>111</sup>, two of them, the argument from infallibility and the argument that reasons cannot be treated as causes because of their alleged failure to be logically distinct from actions do, as we have now seen, find convincing responses in

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<sup>107</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'The antecedents of action' in *Against the Self-Images of the Age: Essays on Ideology and Philosophy* (Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 1978) p195

<sup>108</sup> Ibid. pp204-205

<sup>109</sup> MacIntyre 'The Idea of a Social Science' (op cit) p215

<sup>110</sup> Ibid. p216

<sup>111</sup> Donald Davidson 'Actions, Reasons and Causes' in *Essays on Actions and Events* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1991) pp12-19

MacIntyre's work. Of the two remaining arguments, the first suggests that only events can be causally connected and that reasons are not events but, rather states or dispositions. However, as Davidson points out, dispositions can figure in causal explanations, for example we might explain the collapse of a bridge in terms of a structural defect, but even if a disposition is not an event its onset certainly is<sup>112</sup>. We are on more difficult ground when we turn to the final remaining argument which suggests that we can only identify relationships of cause and effect through generalisations of many instances, when, in fact, we come to conclusions about reasons for actions on the basis of singular and possibly unrepeatable actions. In response to this MacDonald and Pettit suggest that there is nothing to prevent us from connecting singular instances with causal laws, just as I might connect a crack in a mirror with a powerful vibration in the room, despite the lack of any generalisation at my disposal about the concomitance of such events<sup>113</sup>. Davidson's suggestion that there does not have to be any law connecting events classified as reasons with events classified as actions, as opposed to classifications that are neurological, chemical, or physical is, of course, another line of thought that cannot be further pursued here.

If these responses are sound and reasons can be categorised as part of a causal explanation of behaviour, we are free to engage in a wider enquiry than Winch, or MacIntyre in 'A Mistake About Causality in Social Science', lead us to believe was possible. As MacIntyre puts it in 'The Idea of a Social Science':

a distinction may be made between those rules which agents in a given society sincerely profess to follow and to which their actions may in fact conform but which do not in fact direct their actions, and those rules which, whether they profess to follow or not, do in fact guide their acts by providing them with reasons and motives for acting in one way rather than another. The making of this distinction is essential to the notions of *ideology* and of *false consciousness*,

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<sup>112</sup> Ibid. p12

<sup>113</sup> MacDonald and Pettit *Semantics and Social Science* (op cit) p89



notions which are extremely important to some non-Marxists as well as to Marxist social scientists.<sup>114</sup>

This is the perspective that MacIntyre is able to take in 'The Idea of a Social Science' but which is put in doubt by any account that focuses exclusively on the agent's self-understanding. It is therefore contrary to his own earlier essays, for example the solidly Wittgensteinian position of 'A mistake about causality in social science', and the inability to get to grips with such questions in the later work on traditions. Indeed, one is struck by the odd conclusion that MacIntyre seems to be at his most Marxist in the analysis that he gives of the role of an agent's self-understanding in articles that date from the period of his disillusionment with Marxism and not in the work that is more contemporary with his Marxist humanist essays.

### 5.7 Thompson on base and superstructure

Human beings need to be understood from two perspectives, they need to be understood both subjectively and objectively. It is for this reason that neither Althusser, nor Thompson, give us an account that is truly satisfactory and on which count MacIntyre's Marxism can sometimes fall down. In this sense, the part subject / part object nature of human beings is ineliminable and it is the recognition of this fact that is the true justification of the distinction between base and superstructure with which generations of Marxists have struggled. As we saw in chapter one, the younger MacIntyre stood opposed to any crude causal account of the relationship between social consciousness and social being as a misunderstanding of Marx's Hegelian vocabulary, and instead suggested that we conceive the mode of production as providing a 'kernel' around which everything else grows<sup>115</sup>. In 'The Poverty of Theory' Thompson does consider MacIntyre's suggestion arguing that, although this would still leave us dependent on metaphor:

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<sup>114</sup> MacIntyre 'The Idea of a Social Science' (op cit) p217

<sup>115</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) pp54-55

'kernel' has the merit of being a vitalist and generative metaphor, and not one which must lead on inevitably to 'concrete' formulations and to 'ivory towers'. It has the more considerable merit of evicting from our very mode of historical apprehension a schizoid notion of man, whose body/soul duality leaves him, in the end, edged towards antinomies in which food is exchanged for morals or for thought.<sup>116</sup>

But, although he believes that the metaphor of the kernel avoids some of the worst reductivist pitfalls of Marx's talk of base / superstructure, Thompson cannot ultimately endorse it because it is still possible to (mis)interpret it as a teleological notion in which 'all the possibilities of growth and of evolution are implicit, nucleated within the original nut' and the 'full dialectical process' is left unexplored<sup>117</sup>.

However, if the kernel analogy cannot be fully endorsed and base and superstructure is to be rejected, then Thompson fails to give us any alternative way in which we can understand this relationship. Indeed, his suggestion that the Soviet Union might be an example of a society in which a (malign) social consciousness determined social being shows a startling failure to relate social consciousness to social being<sup>118</sup>. The roots of this failure lie in Thompson's continuing belief that the Soviet Union, in some way, represented the fulfilment of genuinely socialist aspirations, a belief that left him searching for some explanation of why it had gone so badly wrong in the realm of ideas, a realm that had to be disconnected from economic base, if he was right to see it as fundamentally a socialist achievement. Once we lay to rest any suggestion that the Soviet Union was a socialist form of organisation which represented progress beyond the structures of capitalism, we can also safely ignore the

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<sup>116</sup> Thompson 'The Poverty of Theory' (op cit) p331

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid. pp376-379

idea that it could constitute some counter example to historical materialism's emphasis on the conditions of social being.

Thompson's characterisation of the Soviet Union as having escaped from the 'realm of necessity' is rightly criticised by Anderson on the grounds that it could better be characterised as stumbling through:

a long series of unpredicted social crises and uncontrolled economic processes, from sudden grain shortages to wild epidemics of terror to creeping paralyses of productivity – all of them blind motions of a society dark to all its members<sup>119</sup>.

However, if this further demonstrates the failure of Thompson's analysis on this point, it does also highlight another sense in which we can consider the possible liberation of the human subject. This is not liberation in the idealist sense of a human consciousness that is conceived as able to frictionlessly direct human affairs as it chooses. Rather it is the freedom from subjection to the blind motions of society that are indifferent to human fulfilment, a freedom in which, as Thompson puts it, things cease to ride mankind<sup>120</sup>. This is the aspect of socialist aspiration that Althusser could not encompass, because he lacked any notion of the condition in which human nature might be most fulfilled. Thompson was on a better track in locating it when he suggested, in 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski', that 'the values of *égalité* are not ones which can be thought up, they must be learned through living them'<sup>121</sup>.

## 5.8 Conclusion

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<sup>119</sup> Anderson *Arguments in English Marxism* (op cit) p23

<sup>120</sup> E. P. Thompson 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p363

<sup>121</sup> Ibid. p385

In the light of the forgoing discussion, I therefore conclude, that a specifically Marxist humanism is not only possible, but necessary, if we are to remain true to Marx's most important insights about the part-subject / part object nature of human beings and the folly of analysing others in terms that one cannot understand one's self. Such a project has much to learn from Thompson's work, however, his neglect of the claims of structure in understanding human beings and the account of base and superstructure that emerges from his treatment of the Soviet Union, mean that we must develop a significantly different account than that which he offers in his polemic against Althusser. In developing such an account, there is much we can learn through an engagement with MacIntyre's work.



# Chapter 6

## Marxist humanism, value pluralism and the sources of social conflict

*If, as I believe, the ends of men are many, and not all of them are in principle compatible with each other, then the possibility of conflict – and of tragedy – can never wholly be eliminated from human life, either personal or social.*

Isaiah Berlin<sup>1</sup>

*The historical materialist prediction of an end to specifically class conflict is not a forecast of heaven on earth. There remains, after all, 'individual [non-class] antagonism', and consequent room for the persistence of 'human misery' and even tragedy.*

G. A. Cohen<sup>2</sup>

What we have now seen is that ethical norms are a crucial aspect of resisting and / or challenging power, or indeed of any important action whatsoever. Neither Althusser's attempt to dismiss the perspective of the subject, nor the emotivist tendency to treat morality as the expression of arbitrary choice properly theorise human agency. As we saw in chapter one, a more promising attempt to theorise the moral resources of resistance on a humanist basis was begun by Alasdair MacIntyre in the late 1950s, at which point he conceived of morality as the means to the satisfaction of informed desire. However, interesting though this is, MacIntyre's earlier works remain undeveloped and leave many important questions unexplored.

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<sup>1</sup> Isaiah Berlin 'Two Concepts of Liberty' in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1969) p169

<sup>2</sup> G. A. Cohen 'Isaiah's Marx and Mine' in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* edited by Edna and Avishai Margalit (London, The Hogarth Press 1991) pp122-123

Kelvin Knight has suggested that MacIntyre's later work can be seen as a fulfilment of E. P. Thompson's hope that MacIntyre would one day complete his own thought about the nature of human agency and resistance to capitalism<sup>3</sup>. What I hope to have shown in chapters three and four is that, although from *After Virtue* onwards MacIntyre does continue to develop an important critique of the manipulation and moral impoverishment present within capitalist society, he does so in a way that can be compared unfavourably with the theoretical resources of Marxism. In general his later perspective fails to grasp the importance of understanding the nature of human beings that underlies historical development and relies, instead, on the distorting perspective of traditions understood as conceptual schemes arising out of cohesive communities. We also saw, in chapter 2, that MacIntyre's later account of the role of ideas in changing the world is also inferior to the subtlety of his own earlier account of the relationship between base and superstructure.

However, even if we are prepared to take up the wager on the emancipatory potential of the working class, in the light of a realistic appraisal of all its contradictions and difficulties (see 3.2), the kind of Marxist humanism proposed by MacIntyre in the late 1950s is far from being fully developed. Morality may be the satisfaction of desire, but as we have seen 'desire' in this context requires elaboration for it is not to be equated with our 'immediate and short-term impulses' but rather with 'what will in the long run and at every level in fact satisfy'<sup>4</sup>. We have also seen that Berlin's understanding of Marxism as an account of positive freedom fails to engage with the reality of Marx's attempt to develop a project of the *self*-emancipation of the working class and that he, instead, presents a misleading caricature of Marxism as the education of the desires of the uncomprehending masses by an informed elite. However, although Berlin's critique is undermined by its unfair characterisation of

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<sup>3</sup> Kelvin Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in *Contemporary Political Studies 1996 Volume 2* edited by Iain Hampshire-Monk and Jeffrey Stanyer (The Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom 1996) p885

<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Freedom and Revolution' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008) p124

Marxism, a lot more needs to be said if we are to have any confidence that the most long-run and satisfying desires of some human beings will not lead to forms of conflict with others in a way that would undermine MacIntyre's attempt to reconcile morality and desire. In this chapter I will seek to develop MacIntyre's earlier account by examining what we can say about the Marxist account of the good.

I will begin by considering three different ways in which one could locate the potential for conflict within human life, those arising from Hobbes, Weber and the form of 'objective pluralism' endorsed by John Gray and attributed by him to Berlin. I will argue, in 6.1, that whereas both Hobbes and Weber do suggest forms of conflict that would undermine the socialist project, they do so on the basis of a deeply mistaken account of evaluation. In 6.2 I will argue that the more interesting account of evaluation present in the incommensurability thesis of Gray and Berlin fails, by itself, to show that we cannot be optimistic about the possibilities for social co-ordination. In section 6.3 I will examine the case for optimism that can be found in the work of Joseph Raz, arguing that it is undermined by his failure to break with capitalism. I shall also argue that the account of human flourishing put forward by liberal thinkers like J. S. Mill is too narrow and parochial to act as any kind of guide to the evaluation of desire and the resolution of conflict between values.

In the rest of the chapter I attempt to put forward an account of human flourishing from the perspective of Marxist humanism that deals with the problem of pluralism, whilst avoiding the pitfalls of the 'ethical liberal' approach that I reject in section 6.3. I begin this task, in 6.4, by examining Marx's most explicit statements about human fulfilment in his *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*'. Then, in 6.5, I raise the anti-perfectionist objection that Marx is so focused on the value of unalienated productive work that he is unable to account for the reasonable value of other goods such as consumption, participation in sports, or time spent with family and friends. In



6.6 I attempt to answer this charge by following Jon Elster in arguing for the central place of self-realisation in our pursuit of the good, a status that is I believe compatible with a recognition of the value of other goods, but in which self-realisation and work play a central role. I follow this, in 6.7, with a brief discussion of the place of work within self-realisation. Finally however, in 6.8, I confront the potential for continuing conflict arising from competing needs and values that can reasonably be expected to continue within a socialist society. I will suggest that out of the models of socialism so far developed, Pat Devine's account of 'negotiated coordination' seems to be the most satisfactory in the light of the forgoing discussion.

### 6.1 Hobbesian egoism and Weberian disenchantment

As we have already seen in chapter one, a central theme of Berlin's work is that it is the failure to acknowledge both pluralism and the necessity of tragedy that is more responsible than any other attitude 'for the slaughter of individuals on the altars of the great historical ideals' as rationalists seek a 'final solution' to the recalcitrant nature of human existence<sup>5</sup>. This failure can, he believes, be seen at work in a rationalist strand in Western thought that can be traced from Plato through to the 'last disciples of Hegel or Marx'. As Berlin sees it, this rationalist perspective will reject his pessimistic conclusion as 'a piece of crude empiricism', an 'abdication before brute facts' which reason must indignantly reject as it seeks to force everything into a coherent system<sup>6</sup>. Seen from this perspective the project of Marxist humanism cannot be realised and the attempt to do so will inevitably end badly.

However, such an all embracing conclusion requires more support than any simple statement about the mere existence of diverse human ends and the possibility that they might conflict with one another. One way of taking Berlin's statement about the necessity of conflict would be to conclude that any attempt at significant social change is doomed to failure and that no society can be improved in one dimension

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid. p167

<sup>6</sup> Ibid. p168

without an accompanying and tragic loss of value in some other. But, to assume this a priori, is not only hugely implausible, but also does not seem to be what Berlin himself has in mind when he suggests that the reality of pluralism and incommensurability still allows for the possibility that in particular cases satisfactory solutions can be found to the dilemmas that we face with 'the application of knowledge and skill'<sup>7</sup>. When we add this to Berlin's failure to engage with Marx's position on such a key point as the self-emancipation of the working class, we can fairly conclude that we are still waiting for a convincing application of his position to the kind of Marxist humanism that we have now seen MacIntyre advance in an earlier chapter. In this section and the next I will, therefore, begin by looking at three different visions of human motivation and rationality, the acceptance of which *would* allow us to reject this project without further investigation.

The work of Thomas Hobbes stands in the most obvious opposition to the optimistic account of social interaction that is presupposed by Marx or the earlier MacIntyre, one in which socialist cooperation would be unthinkable and in which society would be so conflict ridden in the absence of a sovereign with the power to restrain us, that life would be 'solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short'<sup>8</sup>. However, this is a vision that is built upon a deeply flawed account of what human beings want and how they evaluate their desires. Hobbes treats human actions as simply one particular manifestation of matter in motion, a motion which, just as with other animals, can be divided into the 'vital' motion such as the course of the blood, breathing etc. and the 'voluntary' motion that arises from a manner that is first 'fancied in our minds'<sup>9</sup>. Our voluntary motion is directed at obtaining that which we desire, desires which Hobbes understands in terms of a thorough going psychological egoism<sup>10</sup> the implausibility of this perspective which can be seen in Aubrey's well

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<sup>7</sup> Isaiah Berlin 'Introduction' to *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1969) pl

<sup>8</sup> Thomas Hobbes *Leviathan* edited with an introduction by C. B. Macpherson (London, Penguin 1985) p186

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. p118

<sup>10</sup> 'of the voluntary acts of every man, the object 'is some *Good to himselfe*' ibid. p192

known story about Hobbes's attempt to explain away his act of giving money to a beggar as nothing more than the easing of his own pain at seeing the man's plight <sup>11</sup>. In seeking to achieve their goals, Hobbes's egoists seek power to obtain their ends and to prevent others from having the ability to take from them that which they already have, leading ultimately to the war of each against all.

Conflict is, therefore, inevitable in Hobbes's world because the human beings who inhabit it are so conceived that they cannot be moved by forms of motivation that could present an alternative to their self-destructive egoism. This includes any form of moral motivation since, as they appear in the state of nature, judgments of 'good' and 'evil' will do nothing more than reflect what we happen to want and that to which we are averse, bringing us straight back to egoism<sup>12</sup>. One response would be to treat moral judgments as categorical imperatives that do not arise from our desires and so are able to stand apart and regulate them. Such a view of what morality involves is, however, the very account of the ultimately arbitrary and alienating set of commands whose ultimate failure was the subject of MacIntyre's critique in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness'<sup>13</sup>. Moreover, it leaves the Hobbesians uncontested in their depiction of human beings as inevitably dominated by a highly unattractive and unconvincing notion of desire. In order to link morality and desire a defence of socialist humanism must, therefore, seek to give a very different account of what it is we desire and how we come to desire it. Although MacIntyre's case is far from fully developed, what he suggests is that we can come to realise that we can only truly achieve our own well being in a society that achieves this for all. This is not a narrowly instrumental judgment that mutual cooperation delivers the best results in the manner of egoists engaging in a series of repeated prisoners' dilemmas. MacIntyre is rather suggesting a

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<sup>11</sup> Iain Hampshire-Monk *A History of Modern Political Thought: Major Political Thinkers From Hobbes to Marx* (Oxford, Blackwell 1992) pp21-22.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. p120

<sup>13</sup> To say this is not, of course, to give the kind of extended consideration that the Kantian position deserves. Since my focus is on the development of MacIntyre's earlier Marxist humanism and its possible contribution to the moral resources of resistance it is legitimate to leave this fuller discussion for another day.

radically different vision that 'certain ways of sharing human life' are indeed what we most desire<sup>14</sup>, and that the possessive and conflictual account of desire is inadequate as an account of the self that encounters others<sup>15</sup>.

Following Joseph Raz we may say that, whereas it is not unreasonable to assume that human beings seek to further their *well being*, there is nothing self-evident, or inevitable about the proposition that they seek to further the kind of *self-interest* that is the obsession of the Hobbesian individual<sup>16</sup>. A proper understanding of our well being requires a deeper understanding of how we seek to order and evaluate our desires, the informed desires that 'persons would have if they appreciated the true nature of their object' and if they were educated 'so that they would be satisfied by attaining the objects of those desires', to refer back to MacIntyre's subsequent linking of his Marxist humanist argument with the work of James Griffin<sup>17</sup>. Whether we have good reason to think that people can find the satisfaction of their good within a socialist society is, of course, another question to which we shall shortly turn, what we can say at this point is that Hobbes has given us no reason to think at the outset of the investigation that such a project is foredoomed to failure.

However, if in response to Hobbes we decide to appeal to values that are broader than the kind of considerations that he will allow his self-interested agents to possess, we must also come to terms with Weber's provocative thesis that it is the nature of just these values and the broader search for meaning and commitment that may itself provide the sources for irresolvable conflict. As Richard Bellamy comments, for Weber meaning is derived 'from the personal relations individuals established

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<sup>14</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: Essays and Articles, 1953–1974* edited by Paul Blackledge and Neil Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008) p65

<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p63

<sup>16</sup> Joseph Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1986) pp295-298

<sup>17</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Where we were, where we are, where we need to be' in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) pp318-319

between their subjective values and their actions' in which purpose in life comes down to 'individual commitment'<sup>18</sup>. It is this that seems to define the 'polytheism' of a world<sup>19</sup> in which we are presented with contradictory goals and ideals and where 'the conflict between these gods is never ending'<sup>20</sup>. The result of this is, as Bellamy suggests, an account of society that is 'permanently characterized' by the struggle for power between 'rival groups, classes and individuals seeking to promote their various interests'<sup>21</sup>. In short, in a disenchanted world universal rational agreement is not possible and our broader value commitments cannot rise above the conflict of interests, they are part of it.

Just as Hobbes's account gave him a justification for one form of political project, the defence of the power of the sovereign, Weber's account of values gives him his account of politics guided by the 'ethic of responsibility'. Weber believes that ethical convictions have their place only in an otherworldly spiritualised sense whose kingdom is 'not of this world'. What he terms the 'ethic of conviction' that takes them as the starting point for political action is dangerously out of place in the political arena<sup>22</sup>. This is because engagement in politics requires the methods of force and the acceptance that morally dubious or dangerous means are often necessary to achieve 'good' ends<sup>23</sup>. It is not that the alternative 'ethic of responsibility' is simply 'a matter of the head', as Weber puts it, but that the responsible politician is thoroughly aware of and adapted to the nature of the political arena that he inhabits. It is an arena in which conflict is perpetual and to engage in politics as a way of solving the world's problems with reference to an ultimate and non-negotiable ethical goal can only end up

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<sup>18</sup> Richard Bellamy *Liberalism and Modern Society: A Historical Argument* (University Park PA, Pennsylvania State University Press 1992) p185

<sup>19</sup> Max Weber 'Science as a Vocation' in *The Vocation Lectures: 'Science as a Vocation' and 'Politics as a Vocation'* edited and with an introduction by David Owen and Tracy B Strong, translated by Rodney Livingstone (2004 Indianapolis, Hackett Publishing Company Inc.) p22

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. p27

<sup>21</sup> Bellamy *Liberalism and Modern Society* (op cit) p204

<sup>22</sup> Weber 'Politics as a Vocation' in *The Vocation Lectures* (op cit) p90

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p84

damaging and discrediting the 'idols' that are fought for<sup>24</sup>. Thus, he believes, an ethic of conviction based on 'love against force' may be transformed in the political realm into a political project which uses violence for the vain goal of suppressing violence once and for all<sup>25</sup>. On this basis Marxist humanism would be condemned for carrying fundamental moral commitments into the political realm where they can only do harm.

However, even though this is an altogether more sophisticated thesis about the endemic nature of conflict than that which is presented by Hobbes, we must ultimately conclude that it is still only able to generate such a pessimistic vision at the cost of an inadequate understanding of human values. A good place to begin any consideration of what this must involve would be to look at Charles Taylor's account of the distinction between strong and weak evaluation. Essentially he argues that the ability to evaluate our desires and to decide which of them is truly desirable is an essential feature of human agency. The Hobbesian agent only engages in a form of weak evaluation where deliberation is limited to judging whether rival desires are compatible and calculating the way in which to achieve the greatest possible satisfaction, a process that Iain Hampshire-Monk tellingly describes as resembling 'a play of forces within a passive vessel'<sup>26</sup>. The strong evaluator, by contrast, can make qualitative judgments about her desires considering what is 'higher and lower, virtuous and vicious, more and less fulfilling, more and less refined, profound and superficial, noble and base'<sup>27</sup> and thus possess a kind of depth that Taylor is, surely, right to say is essential, if we are to be true to our experience of deliberation<sup>28</sup>. Weber is not giving us anything as crude as Hobbes' weak evaluator, but, by treating our evaluation as merely an expressions of our own will, he undermines strong evaluation by failing to

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p91

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. p85

<sup>26</sup> Iain Hampshire-Monk *A History of Modern Political Thought* (op cit) p22

<sup>27</sup> Charles Taylor 'What is Human Agency?' in *Human Agency and Language: Philosophical Papers I* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1985) p16

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. p28

capture what it is that is compelling about our goals, which gives the very possibility of the kind of tragic choice to which Berlin's work helps to draw our attention.

This point is well made by Taylor in relation to Sartre's famous story of the dilemma of the young man who must choose between staying with his mother or abandoning her to join the free French and fight the Nazis<sup>29</sup>. Sartre convincingly shows us that there is no easy formula (Kantian, Christian or otherwise) that can get us off the hook and provide a single definitive answer as to what the young man must do<sup>30</sup>. Instead, he argues that the situation can only be resolved by the young man making a radical choice with no authority beyond his own will or decision. However, even if this is an adequate way of characterising the choice *between* values, a proposition that we shall have cause to reject in the discussion of the following sections, it cannot perform the role that Sartre suggests and be the source of the value of the options with which the young man is presented. The reason for this is, if this was the case and our values arose from our choices, there could be no tragedy and all dilemmas could be resolved without loss by simply declaring one of the rival claims that apparently demand our commitment to be 'dead and inoperative'. It would also open the ridiculous possibility that we could have grievous dilemmas about anything at all, such as whether to go and get an ice cream cone<sup>31</sup>.

At the end of chapter 1 (section 1.6) we saw that in *A Short History of Ethics* MacIntyre had maintained that judgements about human nature were simply the product of a form of life that could not meaningfully pass judgment on the understanding of human beings present in rival conceptual schemes. We also saw, in chapter 4, that this could not be true because conceptual schemes in MacIntyre's sense simply do not exist, and that it is possible to translate and understand the claims that others make against us. This was a point that MacIntyre seemed to be accepting

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid. p29

<sup>30</sup> Jean Paul Sartre *Existentialism and Humanism* (London, Methuen 1997) p36

<sup>31</sup> Taylor 'What is Human Agency?' (op cit) p30

when he challenged other philosophical traditions to explain how they could take account of the truth of human 'animality, disability and vulnerability'<sup>32</sup>. It is certainly a point that we need to invoke here where we must, I believe, conclude that we can understand Hobbes and Weber and we can conclude that neither is able to prove the inevitability of endemic social conflict without invoking an account of agency and deliberation that is a shocking and unconvincing revision of how we understand ourselves. Even the supposedly more subtle thought of Weber, for all his talk of the warring gods, fails to recognise that real significance of the tragic conflict between different values.

## 6.2 Incommensurability and value pluralism

The final basis on which a pessimistic case for the inevitability of conflict starts out from what John Gray in his study of Berlin terms 'objective pluralism'<sup>33</sup>. This is also the position that he himself endorses when he asserts that the value of conflicting demands which we face cannot be treated as 'brute wants' or mere preferences but must rather 'express our beliefs about how our lives are to be lived'<sup>34</sup>. In short, the final suggestion that I shall consider is that it is the incommensurability of the different goods that strong evaluators encounter that undermines the attempt to reconcile the goals of different human beings and which must lead to endemic conflict.

The term incommensurability can encompass several distinct uses<sup>35</sup>. For example, in chapter 4, we were concerned with the form of incommensurability that allegedly arises when we attempt to compare the terms of one conceptual scheme with another separate scheme, a fact that is supposed to result in a failure of translation. Here I will assume that successful interpretation of others is possible and,

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<sup>32</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999) pp.xxi-xii

<sup>33</sup> John Gray *Berlin* (London, Fontana 1995) p46

<sup>34</sup> John Gray *Two Faces of Liberalism* (Cambridge, Polity 2000) p45

<sup>35</sup> See Ruth Chang's introduction to *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* edited by Ruth Chang (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 1997) p1



instead, turn my attention to the use of incommensurability to denote incomparability between different options or values, a form of incommensurability that could potentially exist even within a single conceptual scheme as MacIntyre and others have imagined them.

It is possible to characterise this notion of incomparability in terms of the breakdown or failure of transitivity. Thus Gray suggests that, to say that Aeschylus is incommensurable in value to Shakespeare, as opposed to claiming that the two are simply equal in value, is to maintain that, even if Euripides can be shown to be better than Aeschylus, it will not follow that he is better than Shakespeare, a claim that could follow in the case of the relation of equality<sup>36</sup>. There are, however, drawbacks to this way of putting it, since, as Raz observes, we can imagine two incommensurable options for which there is a third option that is better than both<sup>37</sup>. Instead, the more central claim that Raz and Gray would both accept, is that incommensurability is not simply a mistaken account of equality of value or indeterminacy<sup>38</sup>. As Raz puts it, 'A and B are incommensurable if it is neither true that one is better than the other nor true that they are of equal value.'<sup>39</sup>. With this in mind, if it is true that there are widespread incommensurabilities between goods, then conflict will enter into our deliberation at a deep level. If, for example, the value of self-knowledge is incommensurable with the value of creativity and there may be situations, such as the mental life of a great artist like van Gogh (as described by Berlin), where the two cannot coexist and we will be presented with conflicts and tragic choices for which there is no final rational solution<sup>40</sup>.

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<sup>36</sup> Gray *Berlin* (op cit) pp50-51

<sup>37</sup> Raz treats the failure of transitivity as a useful test rather than a definition. See Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (op cit) pp325-326

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Joseph Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1986) p322

<sup>40</sup> This example comes from Isaiah Berlin – see Gray *Berlin* (op cit) p34

What are we to make of such claims? James Griffin suggests that we should accept that there exists a plurality of qualitatively distinct goods that cannot be simply plotted on a single cardinal scale, but that we can do this without also accepting the impossibility of meaningful comparisons. Thus, if we take the examples of liberty, equality and fraternity, Griffin asks if it really is the case that it is impossible to make meaningful comparisons and tradeoffs between them. For example, might we not be prepared to accept the sacrifice of a small liberty for a broad life-enhancing personal gain, some minor social divisiveness for liberty, or to give up some personal liberty in order to go and live in another more repressive country with someone one loves<sup>41</sup>? Similarly, he argues that it might be possible to make meaningful trade-offs even of goods as absolute and pressing the preservation of human life. In this context he asks us to consider whether we might not be prepared to follow the French and refuse to sacrifice the aesthetic beauty of the tree lined roads of the French countryside in exchange for a reduction in the number of road deaths that could be prevented if all the trees were to be cut down<sup>42</sup>.

However, Griffin's suggestion that we understand the most troubling conflicts of goods in terms of 'rough equality' rather than incommensurability, does not make the comparisons we have to make painless or easy, since this still allows for values to be 'irreducibly plural' and to exclude one another. As he puts it:

Happiness can conflict with knowledge, mercy with justice, liberty with fraternity, and so on. And they can conflict in a way that allows no resolution without often wrenching loss of value.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> James Griffin 'Incommensurability: What's the Problem?' in *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* edited by Ruth Chang (Cambridge MA, Harvard University Press 1997) p37

<sup>42</sup> James Griffin *Well-Being: Its meaning, measurement, and moral importance* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1986) p82

<sup>43</sup> Griffin 'Incommensurability: What's the Problem?' (op cit) p36

This is why I believe that Griffin does not have to accept Raz's charge that, in contrast to incommensurability, rough equality presupposes indifference between the options that we face. If we are to conceive of an alternative value relation to the choice between better than, worse than and equally good<sup>44</sup>, then such a notion of rough equality would depend on complex judgments that could be difficult to fully elucidate and understand. We could be anything but indifferent to such difficult choices. It is also why even scepticism about the possibility of the full blown failure of comparability still seems to leave room for Berlin's suggestion that conflict and tragedy cannot be eliminated from human lives.

Berlin's contention, with which I opened this section, suggests that, because the ends of human beings are many, conflict and tragedy are an inevitable part of both the personal *and* social dimensions of human life. However, so far all we have is a suggestion about the manner of our personal deliberation. One way to bridge this gap and to defend Berlin's social pessimism would be to claim that, since different people are capable of forming conflicting perspectives about the values that should be pursued and use this as the basis for making contested claims over limited resources, then we may potentially have a source of conflict that is just as disruptive as is asserted to be the case by any crude Hobbesian account of possessive individualism<sup>45</sup>. In this case, unless we are prepared to believe in limitless material abundance, Marx's faith in the possibility of a society where the development of each does not conflict with the development of all will be in vain. In its place we will have something like Weber's account of politics guided by an ethic of responsibility where compromises are negotiated in a social arena that is fundamentally marked by endemic conflict between human beings and their commitment to different values, even though these values need to be understood in a manner very different to that in which they appear in Weber's work.

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<sup>44</sup> Chang calls this the trichotomy thesis. See Chang's introduction to *Incommensurability, Incomparability and Practical Reason* (op cit) p4

<sup>45</sup> See John Rawls *A Theory of Justice* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1973) section 22 'The circumstances of justice'. See also David Hume *A Treatise on Human Nature* book. III, part II, sec. ii.

However, although this represents one possibility, such an argument proceeds much too quickly. Even in the absence of limitless resources it is, at least, conceivable that the diverse goals that different human beings will want to pursue can be simultaneously realised. We might even suggest that there is a wide range of possibilities in between the extremes of ever present conflict and its complete absence, possibilities that depend on how people actually come to pursue their good in a given social order and on how resources for self-development are distributed. The notion that value pluralism is compatible with a range of possibilities considerably different to the situation within capitalist society can only be rejected, out of hand, if we are prepared to simply assume that the level of existing social conflict must entirely reflect some conceptual truth about value pluralism and cannot have anything to do with structural inequalities in power and resources.

### 6.3 The failure of liberal optimism

The accusation against socialism is that it does not take the sources of conflict seriously and as such is ultimately committed to a utopian account of social co-operation. We have already seen that the mere existence of a plurality of qualitatively distinct goods (theorised either as incommensurability or 'rough equality') does not prove this point, it does, however, open up the possibility that forms of conflict exist that are deeper than the contingent features of the capitalist order. This is a challenge that I will begin to take up in earnest from section 6.4 onwards. First, however, I would like to prepare the ground by examining the similar criticisms of utopianism that have been levelled against forms of the liberal tradition, those which Bellamy terms 'ethical liberalism'<sup>46</sup>. I believe that his criticisms of such 'ethical liberals' as Raz and J. S. Mill are broadly just. My task in this section and those that follow is to explain why they need not apply to an alternative socialist project.

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<sup>46</sup> This is in contrast to his own commitment to a form of the Weberian politics of responsibility. See 6.8 below

Joseph Raz presents us with an interesting case in that he puts forward an account of value pluralism and incommensurability, whilst maintaining an optimistic stance when it comes to assessing the necessary extent of social conflict. Uncontroversially enough, Raz acknowledges that our pursuit of well being depends in part on the satisfaction of our basic biological needs, needs for food, shelter and the like that will lead to conflict if access to them is limited by 'environmental and social conditions'<sup>47</sup>. However, he goes on to claim that our wellbeing is 'to a considerable extent' a function of our non-biologically determined goals<sup>48</sup>, goals that he believes must arise from a context of a shared social form<sup>49</sup>. Raz stresses that he is not expressing a commitment to conventionalism, but is instead suggesting that many of our comprehensive goals require social institutions for their very possibility. This is most obvious when one considers the impossibility of being a 'doctor', as opposed to simply being someone who cures a disease, outside of a specific social context. But it is also true of other less obvious activities like bird watching, which rely on a shared set of social conventions and understandings for them to be meaningful activities<sup>50</sup>. Crucially it is the embedding of our goals within social forms that leads Raz to say that he knows of no reason to regard the existence of pervasive conflicts as 'conceptually or naturally inescapable'<sup>51</sup>:

On the contrary we have reason to think conflicts between morality and the agent's well-being, albeit inevitable, are only accidental and occasional. Given that the well-being of the agent is in the successful pursuit of valuable goals, and that value depends on social forms, it is of the essence of value that it contributes to the constitution of the agent's personal well-being just as much it defines moral objectives. The source of value is one for the individual and the

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<sup>47</sup> Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (op cit) p318

<sup>48</sup> Ibid. p294

<sup>49</sup> Ibid. pp308-309

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. pp310-311

<sup>51</sup> Ibid. p318

community. Individuals define the contours of their own lives by drawing on the communal pool of values. These will, in well-ordered societies, contribute indiscriminately both to their self-interest and to other aspects of their well-being. They also define the field of moral values. There is but one source for morality and for personal well-being.<sup>52</sup>

Raz's account of 'social forms' can usefully be compared with what Alasdair MacIntyre says about practices in *After Virtue*. As we saw in 3.1, MacIntyre suggests that we can find internal goods in what he terms 'practices', which he defines as 'coherent and complex form of socially established cooperative human activity'<sup>53</sup>. He even suggests that the internal goods achieved in practices present a very different logic from the zero-sum game of possessive individualism, since my pursuit of own good through this channel can be the cause of enrichment for the whole relevant community<sup>54</sup>. However, in his presentation of 'practices' MacIntyre stresses the extent to which such practices can be undermined by the dominance of the external goods of wealth and power within the institutions in which they exist<sup>55</sup>. Indeed, as we have seen, he convincingly argues that the modern social order is one that can be characterised by the systematic attempt to subordinate internal goods to external bureaucratically determined understandings of performance<sup>56</sup>. As we can see above, Raz does acknowledge that his account of 'social forms' refers to how things are supposed to be in 'well-ordered societies' but unlike MacIntyre, and unlike the Marxist tradition, he does not seem to be aware of quite how profound a transformation would be required to secure the conditions in which practices could exist in good order, a recognition that any defensible account of the overcoming of conflict within such co-operative 'social forms' would have to acknowledge.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid. p319

<sup>53</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) p187

<sup>54</sup> Ibid. pp190-191

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid. pp26-28

However, as well as maintaining the necessity of shared co-operative social forms to our pursuit of the good, Raz is also committed to the central importance of pursuing our projects autonomously, that is that we should make our own lives<sup>57</sup>. In response to challenges concerning the status of the autonomous individual, Raz accepts that there are possible lives that are valuable and yet lack autonomy<sup>58</sup>, however, he also claims that autonomy is a crucial precondition for human flourishing in the social world that we now inhabit even if there were also some autonomous persons in previous social orders. As he puts it:

It is an ideal particularly suited to the conditions of the industrial age and its aftermath with their fast changing technologies and free movement of labour. They call for an ability to cope with changing technological, economic and social conditions, for an ability to adjust, to acquire new skills, to move from one subculture to another, to come to terms with new scientific and moral views. Its suitability for our conditions and the deep roots it has by now acquired in our culture contribute to a powerful case to this ideal.<sup>59</sup>

The problem with this argument is that the autonomous liberal individual is not the only figure who is able to survive the conditions of capitalist modernity. For example, following Bhikhu Parekh, John Gray responds to Raz by reminding us of the many examples of successful adaptation to technological and economic change that have not emphasised autonomy, such as the modernisation of Japanese and Singaporean society, or the example of Asian immigrants in western countries<sup>60</sup>. Even more fundamentally, it is also undoubtedly true that the adoption of manipulative and exploitative attitudes can also be an extremely successful strategy for surviving capitalism. The bureaucratic manager whose activities undermine the internal goods

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<sup>57</sup> Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (op cit) p369

<sup>58</sup> The reference is to Raz's article 'Facing Up: A Reply' quoted in Gray *Two Faces of Liberalism* (op cit) p96

<sup>59</sup> Raz *The Morality of Freedom* (op cit) pp369 -370

<sup>60</sup> Gray *Two Faces of Liberalism* (op cit) p97

of social forms is, quite understandably, cited by MacIntyre as one of the central characters of the modern order<sup>61</sup>.

An alternative way of defending the liberal commitment to autonomy would be to follow earlier liberal thinkers like Mill in claiming that the life of the liberal individual is the most satisfying, at least once we have understood satisfaction as it is in *On Liberty* in the context of 'man as a progressive being'<sup>62</sup>. This is the character discourse that Bellamy identifies as underlying the assumptions of Victorian liberalism and which certainly underlies Mill's assumptions that the fully informed person would prefer the life of Socratic dissatisfaction to swinish contentment<sup>63</sup>. It is also, as Sayers rightly says, a vision of the good that is unconvincingly one sided in its attempt to praise mental and cultured activities to the exclusion of the physical and sensual life of the 'fool'<sup>64</sup>. However, what has gone wrong here is not simply that Mill or anyone else has made an appeal to human nature. As I argued in chapter 4, claims about the nature of human beings must be taken seriously and cannot be written off as nothing more than the discourse of a particular conceptual scheme. The problem comes when such claims are used as the means to assert a very parochial understanding of human beings, whether the telos of human life associated with Aristotle's Athenian 'great souled' aristocrat or Mill's 'goodly dose of bourgeois priggishness'<sup>65</sup>. It is still open to us to follow the younger MacIntyre in seeking to ground moral judgments in an account of what will satisfy human nature, if we can show that our account of needs and desires cannot, in its turn, be convicted of the narrowness that it diagnoses in others. In order to see whether this is the case we must now turn to the account of human flourishing that can be found in the early writings of Karl Marx.

#### 6.4 Marx on human nature, alienation and community

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<sup>61</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp26-28

<sup>62</sup> J. S. Mill *On Liberty* edited by John Gray and G. W. Smith (London, Routledge 1991) p31

<sup>63</sup> Richard Bellamy *Liberalism and Modern Society* (op cit) pp9-21

<sup>64</sup> Sean Sayers *Marxism and Human Nature* (Abingdon, Routledge 1998) p4

<sup>65</sup> Bellamy *Liberalism and Modern Society* (op cit) p12



The best starting point for any Marxist account of the desires and needs of human beings would be to look at the kind of philosophical anthropology that Marx himself developed in the *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844* and in such other earlier works as his 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*'. The most well known aspect of this work is the account of 'species being' and alienation developed in the *1844 Manuscripts*. Here Marx suggests that each human being can look upon him, or herself, as a 'universal and therefore free being'<sup>66</sup>, a capacity that is tied up with our self-conscious, self reflective nature:

The animal is immediately one with its life activity. It is not distinct from that activity; it *is* that activity. Man makes his life activity itself an object of his will and consciousness. He has conscious life activity. It is not a determination with which he directly merges. Conscious life activity directly distinguishes man from animal life activity. Only because of that is he a species-being. Or rather, he is a conscious being, i.e. his own life is an object for him, only because he is a species-being.<sup>67</sup>

From this basis Marx claims that 'free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man'<sup>68</sup>. Human beings do share something with other animals, namely the fact that they must live from the organic nature of which they themselves are a part. However, this does not prevent a crucial distinction from opening up between human productive activity and that of other animals:

The practical creation of an *objective world*, the fashioning of inorganic nature, is proof that man is a conscious species-being – i.e., a being which treats the species as its own essential being or itself as a species-being. It is true that animals also produce. They build nests and dwellings, like the bee, the beaver,

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<sup>66</sup> Karl Marx 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)' in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin 1975) p327

<sup>67</sup> Ibid. p328

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

the ant, etc. But they produce only their own immediate needs or those of their young; they produce only when immediate physical need compels them to do so, while man produces even when he is free from physical need and truly produces only in freedom from such need; they produce only themselves, while man reproduces the whole of nature; their products belong immediately to their physical bodies, while man freely confronts his own product. Animals produce only according to the standards and needs of the species to which they belong, while man is capable of producing according to the standards of every species and of applying to each object its inherent standard; hence, man also produces in accordance with the laws of beauty.<sup>69</sup>

Thus productive activity of a particular kind that reflects self-conscious awareness and free choice is suggested as the species life of human beings.

The crucial feature of capitalism from this point of view is that the worker does not control her work. If this is correct then it cannot be a means to the fulfilment of self-conscious awareness and free choice and, hence, is a loss of self rather than a means of self-expression<sup>70</sup>. It can only, therefore, be a means to satisfy needs outside itself and so takes on an alien character that is demonstrated by the fact that it is 'shunned like the plague' in the absence of compulsion<sup>71</sup>. Instead:

man (the worker) feels that he is acting freely only in his animal functions – eating, drinking and procreating, or at most in his dwelling and adornment – while in his human functions he is nothing more than an animal.<sup>72</sup>

This gives us the basis for an indictment of capitalism for failing to allow us to address our true needs and desires and so alienate us from our nature. If such an account can

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid. p329

<sup>70</sup> Ibid. p327

<sup>71</sup> Ibid. p326

<sup>72</sup> Ibid. p327

be maintained then, so long as our very involvement in free productive activity does not itself lead us into intractable conflict, we have exactly the kind of account in which forms of co-operation with others fulfils our desires that MacIntyre's Marxist humanism requires.

However, more needs to be said if we are to construct a full account of social relationships in a socialist society. The key point here is that Marx does not view production as simply a creative act for the good of the producer. However, much of the emphasis of the *1844 Manuscripts* may be on the good of production for the producer, it is also patently a way in which we can fulfil the needs of others and, in part decides our relationship with them. In this respect, a key feature of capitalist society is the way that it structures the relationships between individuals such that society becomes an abstraction or an external imposition over the individual where others can either become a threat or a means by which I can further my self-interest. Thus, commenting on James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*, Marx discusses the way in which production in capitalist society is prevented from being something that is engaged in for the sake of others with the goal of fulfilling human needs. Instead, I produce for myself rather than others and I am unable to recognise what I do as a contribution to genuinely social production<sup>73</sup>. In the process the needs of others becomes, not the end of my production, but a source of weakness that gives me power just as their production can give them power over me<sup>74</sup>. In this situation 'society' becomes an abstract entity standing over the individual, although, as Marx was later to go on to state in the *Grundrisse*, it is ironically just as the social union comes most to confront the individual as a mere means to his private ends from the eighteenth century onwards, that the social relations of production, in fact, reach the highest state of their development<sup>75</sup>. In this situation the political community of the state cannot

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<sup>73</sup> Karl Marx 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin 1975) p269

<sup>74</sup> Ibid. pp275-276

<sup>75</sup> Karl Marx *Grundrisse* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p346

resolve the conflict that bourgeois society engenders no matter what its rhetoric of the equality of the citizen. As Marx puts it in 'On the Jewish Question':

Where the political state has attained its true development, man – not only in thought, in consciousness, but in reality, in life – leads a twofold life, a heavenly and an earthly life: life in the political community, in which he considers himself a communal being, and life in civil society, in which he acts as a private individual, regards other men as a means, degrades himself into a means, and becomes the plaything of alien powers. The relation of the political state to civil society is just as spiritual as the relations of heaven to earth. The political state stands in the same opposition to civil society, and it prevails over the latter in the same way as religion prevails over the narrowness of the secular world – *i.e.*, by likewise having always to acknowledge it, to restore it, and allow itself to be dominated by it.<sup>76</sup>

Marx believes that, at best, the rights that emerge from this arrangement will be the kind of boundary posts that seek to stake out the territory of egoistic and self-sufficient monads separated from one another and from the notion of community<sup>77</sup>.

Communism for Marx represents a new set of possibilities achieved by the end of the estrangement which makes society an abstraction over the individual, but it is not the privileging of self-sacrifice over egoism. As he explains in his critique of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology*, communism is not a matter of moral injunctions to love one another and to reject egoism since, 'egoism, just as much as self-sacrifice, *is* in definite circumstances a necessary form of the self-assertion of individuals'<sup>78</sup>. To put this into the terms of the earlier discussion in 6.1, we might add that the kind of

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<sup>76</sup> Karl Marx 'On the Jewish Question' in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* translated by Rodney Livingstone and Gregor Benton (London: Penguin 1975) p220

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. p229

<sup>78</sup> Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *The German Ideology* edited and with introduction by C. J. Arthur (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1974) pp104-105

resolution of these motives that is being envisaged is one in which, just because the individual will no longer be solely concerned with her narrow *self-interest*, it does not follow that she is being asked to selflessly abandon the pursuit of her *well being*. It is in this context that Marx's suggestion that 'communists do not preach *morality* at all' can best be developed. Marx's treatment of morality is, as we have already observed in chapter 5, a difficult topic and his explicit statements on the topic are often blankly dismissive. What we can say in this context is that the kind of morality that simply exists as an alienating system of external constraints on my pursuit of my good cannot bridge the gap between individuals, but this leaves open the possibility of an authentically socialist humanism that seeks to understand morality as the expression and ordering of desire.

This coincidence of self-development through the pursuit of creative demanding work and genuine community with others would be the highest expression of what MacIntyre is seeking when he talks of the discovery that certain ways of sharing human life are what we most desire<sup>79</sup>. This vision of the relationship between social cooperation and individual development is most clearly summarised by Marx in this remarkable passage from his comments on James Mill:

Let us suppose that we had carried out production as human beings. Each of us would have *in two ways affirmed* himself and the other person. 1) In my *production* I would have objectified my *individuality, its specific character*, and therefore enjoyed not only an individual *manifestation of my life* during the activity, but also when looking at the object I would have the individual pleasure of knowing my personality to be *objective, visible to the senses* and hence a power *beyond all doubt*. 2) In your enjoyment or use of my product I would have the *direct* enjoyment both of being conscious of having satisfied a *human* need by my work, that is, of having objectified *man's* essential nature,

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<sup>79</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p65

and of having thus created an object corresponding to the need of another *man's* essential nature. 3) I would have been for you the *mediator* between you and the species, and therefore would become recognised and felt by you yourself as a completion of your own essential nature and as a necessary part of yourself, and consequently would know myself to be confirmed both in your thought and your love. 4) In the individual expression of my life I would have directly created your expression of your life, and therefore in my individual activity I would have directly *confirmed* and *realised* my true nature, my *human* nature, my *communal nature*.<sup>80</sup>

### 6.5 Criticism of Marx's account of the good

However, it is at this point that the challenge of pluralism can be made by those who argue that Marx's emphasis on the good of creative and productive activity neglects the diversity of goods that human beings may legitimately desire, thus earning him a place alongside Mill and Aristotle with their one-sided and parochial assumptions about human fulfilment.

A good concise version of this criticism can be found in Will Kymlicka's discussion of Marxist perfectionism in his popular student textbook *Political Philosophy: An Introduction*. Kymlicka's point is that he accepts that there is value to unalienated work, but questions why it should always have priority over other goods such as leisure pursuits, the value of consumption, or the value of time spent with family and friends<sup>81</sup>. All things being equal, we might like to have unalienated work and to have access to all these things, but things are not always equal. Even if we don't accept Kymlicka's suggestion that alienated work may be far more productive than its unalienated equivalent, and so allow more consumption opportunities, we can agree that our time is limited and we will have to make decisions about what to pursue and

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<sup>80</sup> Marx 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' (op cit) p278

<sup>81</sup> Will Kymlicka *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (Oxford, Clarendon Press 1990) pp188-189

what to neglect. If we have to make a choice it is possible to imagine circumstances in which we would reasonably give priority to unalienated work, for example when we compare it to the kind of unfulfilling consumption of possessive individualism and a pointless race to keep up with the Joneses. But, Kymlicka asks, why must there be anything pathological about 'a music-lover wanting expensive stereo equipment, and being willing to perform alienated labour to acquire it'? (Or, to return to my previous point about the relative efficiency of alienated and unalienated work, we might rather conceive this as a music lover who prefers to do less creative work so that he actually has time to listen to his music collection.) Similarly a tennis player who substitutes productive work for extra hours of practice, or the parent who forgoes creative work to be with her children, will have rejected what seems to be Marx's single minded focus on production but have, surely, not done anything wrong. Indeed, in seeming to give productive work such an overwhelming priority over reproduction, Marx may be open to Kymlicka's charge of sexism in neglecting an important aspect of women's experience as not essentially human but rather 'natural' and even 'animal'<sup>82</sup>.

If Marx does present us with such an unconvincingly narrow account of the good then what could have led him to do so? One particularly unconvincing explanation is suggested by Andrew Collier, who claims that, in privileging work, Marx was simply reflecting the work ethic of nineteenth century bourgeois society, a claim that, if true, would put him directly alongside Mill and T. H. Green in Bellamy's line of fire<sup>83</sup>. However, Marx's obvious emphasis on the need for *freely creative* productive activity and his concerns to minimise drudgery, most notably in his hopes for a decrease in the working day in the *Grundrisse*<sup>84</sup>, show that we can give this suggestion short shrift.

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<sup>82</sup> Ibid. p190

<sup>83</sup> Andrew Collier 'Scientific Socialism and the Question of Socialist Values' *Canadian Journal of Philosophy*; Supplementary Volume, 7 (1981) p127

<sup>84</sup> Karl Marx *Grundrisse* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p380

Another suggestion, this time from Kymlicka, is that Marx draws his conclusions from a simple differentia – that is he is attempting to decide what is good for human beings through biological classification and the search for features that are possessed exclusively by our species<sup>85</sup>. If this is correct, then Marx would be arguing in the same manner as Aristotle in section VII Book 7 of *The Nicomachean Ethics*, where he argues that, just as a joiner or a shoemaker has a unique function, so must ‘man’<sup>86</sup>. However, although this may have made sense for Aristotle, it is not tenable for us. For one thing we have a greater understanding of the capacities of non-human animals than either Aristotle or Marx possessed, making any dividing line that we wish to draw far more fuzzy than they may have imagined<sup>87</sup>. For another, it is difficult to see how we can validly move from the unique possession of an attribute to the claim that it is morally significant without the underpinning of a pre-modern understanding of final causes hierarchically organised to an ultimate good. Speculative taxonomy cannot now be a convincing basis for a philosophical anthropology.

However, although Marx may sometimes write as if this is what he is doing, it is perhaps more plausible to interpret his concern to avoiding placing human beings in ‘animal’ conditions, as an attempt at an understanding of how the human condition necessarily shapes the kind of good that we can pursue. Here we can, yet again, return to Marx’s comments on Bentham in volume 1 of *Capital*, where he observes that just as we have to investigate the nature of dogs to know what is good for a dog, to know what is useful to a human being, we must be able to deal with both ‘human nature in general’ and human nature ‘as historically modified in each epoch’<sup>88</sup>. With this in mind, let us return to Marx’s comments about ‘eating, drinking and procreating’ that

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<sup>85</sup> Kymlicka *Contemporary Political Philosophy: An Introduction* (op cit) p189

<sup>86</sup> Aristotle *The Ethics of Aristotle: The Nicomachean Ethics* translated by J. A. K. Thompson, revised with notes and appendices by Hugh Tredennick (London Penguin 1976) pp75-76

<sup>87</sup> Elster reminds us of ability of chimpanzees to communicate with sign language and to show intentionality and insight in Jon Elster *Making Sense of Marx* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1985) p65

<sup>88</sup> Karl Marx *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume I* translated by Ben Fowkes (London, Penguin 1976) pp 758-759



figured in Kymlicka's critique. Marx does describe these functions as 'animal' in the *1844 Manuscripts* but he adds:

It is true that eating, drinking, and procreating, etc. are also genuine human functions. However, when abstracted from other aspects of human activity and turned into final and exclusive ends, they are animal.<sup>89</sup>

Contrary to Kymlicka's suggestion that Marx is appealing to a simple differentia, this passage does not exclude these activities from his account of our good, even though they are, in some sense, shared with other animals. Marx's point is rather that to pursue these things as 'final and exclusive' ends cannot truly reflect our nature as human beings and that this nature requires that a central role be given to the creative tasks that he discusses in his account of our 'species being'. However, even if Marx's argument is not as crude as Kymlicka suggests, we are still owed an explanation of why certain elements have such an important role to play in our pursuit of the good and how a Marxist account can attempt to give a diverse range of goods their due. It is to this issue that I will now turn.

## 6.6 Self-realisation and other goods

The starting point for an account of species being that is not based on a crude differentia would be to look to Jon Elster's discussion of the nature of self-realisation. Self-realisation in Elster's sense can be gained in a wide variety of activities such as:

playing tennis, playing piano, playing chess, making a table, cooking a meal, developing software for computers, constructing the Watts Towers, juggling with a chain saw, acting as a human mannequin, writing a book, contributing to the discussion in a political assembly, bargaining with an employer, trying to

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<sup>89</sup> Marx 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)' (op cit) p327

prove a mathematical theorem, working a lathe, fighting a battle, doing embroidery, organising a political campaign and building a boat.<sup>90</sup>

One of the things that brings this disparate list together is that they all offer forms of satisfaction and therefore, unless something has gone drastically wrong in each case, they can clearly be distinguished from forms of drudgery. However, unlike forms of consumption where the goal of engaging in an activity is to gain satisfaction, these forms of self-realisation have an external purpose on which satisfaction supervenes<sup>91</sup>. In fact, even on the terms of a fairly narrow welfarist understanding of the satisfaction of desire, we can already suggest a reason for the superiority of such activities to passive forms of consumption, since the satisfaction that supervenes on the development of our powers in self-actualisation, is likely to start off low as we struggle to develop our powers but increase, over time, in contrast to the pattern of an initial pay off followed by diminishing satisfaction that characterises repeated consumption<sup>92</sup>. However, as Elster acknowledges, there are forms of self-actualising consumption, such as learning to read poetry, that display a similar form where satisfaction supervenes on the development of our powers and increases with additional effort and sacrifice<sup>93</sup>. Other than self-actualisation, therefore, the second key component of self-realisation that brings us right back to Marx's discussion of species being is the self-externalisation that it achieves. The crucial importance of this dimension is the role that self-externalisation has for the self's relationship with others. Thus Elster plausibly argues, that self-realisation ranks above both self-actualising and passive forms of consumption on the Hegelian grounds that the 'beautiful soul' who seeks no external validation will lack an important source of self-esteem<sup>94</sup>.

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<sup>90</sup> Jon Elster 'Self-realisation in work and politics: the Marxist conception of the good life' in *Alternatives to Capitalism* edited by Jon Elster and Karl Ove Moene (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1989) p129

<sup>91</sup> Ibid. p130

<sup>92</sup> Ibid. pp134-135

<sup>93</sup> Ibid. p136

<sup>94</sup> Ibid. pp136-137

It seems that it is, therefore, possible to put forward reasonable grounds for the centrality of self-realisation. However, this is a centrality which does not, I believe, have to entail a neglect of the value of other goods. As we saw in the previous section, Kymlicka challenges the Marxist perfectionist to explain why there has to be anything pathological about a music lover wanting expensive stereo equipment and being prepared to perform unfulfilling alienating work in order to obtain it, or as I added in 6.5, a music lover who forgoes opportunities for productive activity in order to spend more time with his stereo. Any defensible response must begin by admitting that the appreciation of music has great value both as a form of passive consumption and in the opportunities it offers for self-actualisation. For someone to choose one less hour of self-realising work in order to spend one more hour listening to pop music or getting to grips with Bartok must be admitted to be a reasonable choice that the organisation of a socialist society must be able to accommodate – a topic that I shall pursue in the next section. The key point for socialists is that self-realisation must still have a central place in any reasonable account of the nature of human beings and a life where opportunities to pursue it are not made available stands condemned for preventing such a realisation.

We can, therefore, make perfect sense of the condemnation of a life in which consumption is the 'final and exclusive end' of human beings, whilst leaving open the degree to which human beings might reasonably engage in consumption or self-realising production. Indeed, I believe that it is necessary to stress the crucial importance of the value of consumption for Marxist theorising. This is why G. A. Cohen's well known attempt to liken communism to the performance of a jazz band is so misleading. The need for the different musicians to work together for their own good does, indeed, provide a model for a community whose form challenges the logic of capitalist society. The problem is that this analogy also completely loses touch with the connection between the musicians and the audience, those whom Cohen seems to write off as 'less talented people' who 'obtain some satisfaction not from playing but

from listening' and whose presence seems important mainly to enhance the fulfilment of the band's members. Indeed, everyone, he suggests, 'is guided by his self-regarding goal'<sup>95</sup>. In contrast, in his book *Making Sense of Marx*, Elster justly observes that we cannot devalue consumption too much without also undermining the purposes of those forms of self-realisation that are achieved by satisfying them<sup>96</sup>. However, this seems to be exactly what Cohen is doing. It is only if we are concerned with the very great value that the objects of our production hold for their consumers, that the value of production for the producer can be maintained and it is, only thus, that production can aspire to be carried out in the truly human manner suggested by Marx in his 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*'.

If we turn to look at time spent with family and friends, we can see that Kymlicka's challenge can be addressed in the same way as consumption. Elster observes that such things as raising children, or having sexual relations can be realised in different ways, they can for example be 'drudgery under certain conditions, consumption under others, self-realisation under still different circumstances and spontaneous interaction in some cases'. The question of whether they can be classed as self-realisation depends on whether they can be judged to be performed more or less well by an independently given criteria and give an appropriate level of challenge<sup>97</sup>. However, even if, as seems fairly obvious, there is much that is valuable about personal relationships that cannot be reduced to self-realisation in Elster's sense, there is no more reason to dismiss them than there was to dismiss the goods that can be achieved through consumption. Again, therefore, we find that a socialist society would need to allow people to make different choices about the relative prominence of different goods and activities in their lives. However, whilst allowing for a certain degree of pluralism, the Marxist account of the good would need to be able

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<sup>95</sup> G. A. Cohen 'Self-ownership, communism and equality: against the Marxist technological fix' in *Self-Ownership, Freedom and Equality* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 1995) p122

<sup>96</sup> Elster *Making Sense of Marx* (op cit) p87

<sup>97</sup> Elster 'Self-realisation in work and politics' (op cit) p130

to continue to critique the sheer level of drudgery and lack of recognition that is the outcome of the privatisation of domestic work within capitalism.

Marxist humanism can, therefore, rest on the reasonable claim that, given an understanding of the nature of human beings, we have a central need for self-realisation even if we must also acknowledge the value of other goods on whose importance people might reasonably disagree.

### 6.7 Work and fulfilment

MacIntyre's Marxist humanism treats morality as the fulfilment of desire, and desire, as we have now seen, need not imply the conflictual account of possessive individualism. Now, Marx's comments in his 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' suggest a model of the reconciliation of individuals where I can fulfil myself through my production, which is also your consumption. However, the defence of the central, though not exclusive, claim of self-realisation that I have so far endorsed is, in fact, far broader than productive work as we might ordinarily (narrowly) understand it. For example, if we return to Elster's examples of self-realisation that I quoted at the opening of 6.6, we can see that he includes playing tennis, something that I might pursue completely outside of 'work', as Kymlicka assumes in his criticisms of the Marxist account of the good, or playing and competing in tennis matches could be my means of making a living and my means of providing entertainment to be consumed by others. Elster also suggests that such activities as raising children can, amongst other things, be a means of self-realisation. Does the diversity of the means of self-realisation, therefore, undermine the account of community suggested in the 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*'?

In answering this question an interesting starting point is to note that Marx himself did not always confine his hopes for human fulfilment solely to work in its narrowest sense. So, although work takes centre stage in the *1844 Manuscripts* and the *Critique of the Gotha Programme* treats work as the 'prime need' of life, the *1844*

*Manuscripts* also refers to the broader category of ‘free activity’ as constituting the species-character of human beings<sup>98</sup>. Moreover, he also suggests, in the *Grundrisse*, that automation will allow a communist society to decrease necessary labour time to a minimum with the development of all members of society in the arts and sciences taking the place of work in its narrow sense<sup>99</sup>. These are activities that present opportunities for self development, but they also provide ways in which I can improve the lives of others. Achievement of self-realisation in this context is also an internal good in the sense suggested by MacIntyre in his account of practices (see 3.1 above), that is ‘it is characteristic of them that their achievement is a good for the whole community who participate in the practice’, they do not represent a zero sum game<sup>100</sup>.

However, it is also worth saying that, although it is certainly possible to gain self-realisation, and a good many other crucially important goods, outside of the formal context of work, a strong case can still be made for the centrality of work in human fulfilment, as things now stand, regardless of how things might be in the world briefly imagined in the *Grundrisse*. Sayers suggests that work now plays a crucial and perhaps unparalleled psychological role in the formation of self-esteem, identity, and a sense of order<sup>101</sup>. Work is where many people get one of their most important opportunities to exercise their powers for useful ends and to feel needed. At the same time, in most of its modern forms, it is a social activity that takes people out of their homes and puts them in contact with others<sup>102</sup>. Sayers, therefore, remarks that it should come as no surprise that case studies of the unemployed have repeatedly drawn attention to the demoralising effects of social isolation<sup>103</sup>, forms of demoralisation that have also been raised by feminist critiques of women’s domestic

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<sup>98</sup> ‘The whole character of a species, its species-character, resides in the nature of its life activity, and free conscious activity constitutes the species-character of man.’ Marx ‘Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts (1844)’ in *Karl Marx: Early Writings* (op cit) p328.

<sup>99</sup> Karl Marx *Grundrisse* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p380

<sup>100</sup> MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp190-191

<sup>101</sup> Sean Sayers *Marxism and Human Nature* (Abingdon, Routledge 1998) p39

<sup>102</sup> Ibid. pp41-42

<sup>103</sup> Ibid. p42

role<sup>104</sup>. Sayers concedes that there will be some individuals who find adequate psychological rewards completely outside of their jobs in other activities (music, hobbies, sport, crime) and other institutions (family, church, community). However, there is, surely, some justice in his agreement with M. Jahoda's suggestion that the psychological input required to give one's life a time structure, secure social contacts, share goals and exercise skills under one's own steam, is 'colossal'<sup>105</sup>.

We may, therefore, assume that work and self-realisation are strongly connected, even if they are not coextensive, and that such bonds may, in fact, be loosened by the presence of alternative networks of self-realisation in a socialist society. Whether the need for work, in something like its present form, is a universal human need, or a relatively recent creation, although an interesting point to consider<sup>106</sup>, is not essential for my argument. It is a need for us now, and, as I argued in 4.5, such an element of relativism need not undermine the hold that it has over us.

## 6.8 Implications for the organisation of a socialist society

In seeking to understand how a socialist society could be organised, a good starting point is to recognise that, contrary to Berlin's assertions, Marx did not believe that communism would be free from all conflict. He clearly states, in his Preface to *A Critique of Political Economy*, that bourgeois social relationships are, in one sense, the last antagonistic form of social relationship, but this is not to be understood in the sense of individual antagonism, but rather as that which arises 'from the social

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid. p43. Referring to studies by G. W. Brown and T. Harris Sayers suggests that 'Empirical studies show that the incidence of depression and psychiatric symptoms is higher among housewives than among women with jobs.' Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid. p47

<sup>106</sup> Sayers suggests that the human need for meaningful work is both an ineliminable feature of contemporary psychology and that this need is itself purely a social and historical product – see *ibid.* p53. He seems to be influenced in coming to this conclusion to Marshall Sahlins' interesting observations in *Stone Age Economics* on the dominant role of rest, sleep and socialising amongst hunter-gatherers – see Marshall Sahlins *Stone Age Economics* (London, Tavistock Publications 1972).

conditions of the life of the individuals'<sup>107</sup>. As Cohen suggests, for Marx, the prehistory of human society may end with capitalism, but the history that will follow, will not be a heaven on earth but, instead, will still contain the potential for antagonisms, misery and tragedy<sup>108</sup>. The conclusion of what I have argued so far, is that this is certainly right, though not, perhaps, entirely for reasons that Marx would have endorsed. As we have now seen, this is true at the level of the individual human life where the uncertainty of success in the projects in which we engage and the necessity for us to make choices between valuable, yet incompatible alternatives, will present us with possibly wrenching losses of value – a realisation that is, of course, somewhat distant from Marx's own apparent belief in the possibility of the many sided fulfilment of the individual<sup>109</sup>. We can also now see that the diverse claims on resources for consumption, free time for personal relationships and (possibly rival) activities for promoting self-realisation, would present socialist society with serious issues to resolve.

Although I do not intend to propose a detailed account of the institutions that a socialist society would require to carry out this process, the socialist humanist project, that we have seen outlined so far, can throw an interesting light on the contending models that have been proposed. Excluding the discredited Stalinist model of a command economy, Pat Devine suggests that these proposals can be grouped together into three camps – market socialism, electronic socialism and participatory planning<sup>110</sup>. I will now suggest that the account so far developed strongly supports Devine's conception of participatory planning.

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<sup>107</sup> Karl Marx *A Preface to A Critique of Political Economy* in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p390

<sup>108</sup> G. A. Cohen 'Isaiah's Marx and Mine' (op cit) p123

<sup>109</sup> See Karl Marx and Frederick Engels *The German Ideology* edited and with introduction by C. J. Arthur (London, Lawrence and Wishart 1974) p54

<sup>110</sup> Pat Devine 'Parecon: Life After Capitalism' in *Historical Materialism* (2007) 15 (April 01, 2007) p210



In his discussion of market socialism and meaningful work, Richard Arneson argues that this proposal can be put forward as a solution to the problem of how we can respect people's preferences in the light of pluralism. Arneson asks us to imagine an economy in which profit seeking firms compete with one another and relate to consumers via market mechanisms, but which is socialist in the sense that ultimate decision making power in a firm is vested in a majority vote of the work force<sup>111</sup>. In this situation workers can opt for a structure which maximises opportunities for participation in workplace decision making and self-realisation in work, so long as they are prepared to accept whatever costs such policies generate, costs that will ultimately be registered in the profitability of each firm and the resulting pay and employment it can offer<sup>112</sup>. If it turns out that meaningful work and participation is *more* productive than alienated work, then there may be no trade off to be made for leisure or for self-realisation outside of work. If, as Arneson assumes, it is less efficient, then workers will be free to choose the package that best suits them (high wages and/or shorter hours and low self-realisation or low wages and/or longer hours and high self-realisation) through their choice of job and the votes they cast in periodic workplace elections. It is for this reason that Arneson argues against the traditional socialist opposition to the market and, instead, suggests that, with more equality in people's access of the means of production than exists at present, 'the market ideal is one aspect of socialist aspiration, not a rival doctrine'<sup>113</sup>.

What is positive about Arneson's proposal is that it presents us with a way for each person to make choices and trade offs in their pursuit of the good against some kind of egalitarian norm. The problem is that, although the market is one possible way in which such trade-offs can be made between the interests of producers and consumers, its reliance on the operations of the 'invisible hand' robs those who take part of the opportunity to engage in an important form of deliberation about the goods

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<sup>111</sup> Richard J. Arneson 'Meaningful Work and Market Socialism' in *Ethics* 97 (April 1987) p518

<sup>112</sup> Ibid. pp536

<sup>113</sup> Ibid. pp533

involved. Arneson complains, at one point, that opportunities for self-realisation at work might be rejected as a 'wasteful self-indulgence' by workers who are 'service-orientated' and engage in production for the good of the consumer<sup>114</sup>. We might add that consumers might react in this way if they were told that prices would have to rise in order to fulfil a mandatory requirement that interest and creativity in the work place is to take priority over all other considerations. The problem is that, instead of asking how producers and consumers can present their cases to one another and negotiate a reasonable compromise between the conflicting goods that can be achieved and so establishing the relations of community, what Arneson gives us, is a state of affairs in which the relationship that producers have with consumers is mediated purely by the market and its calculations of profit and loss. Production under such circumstances will not be directly driven by the needs of others any more than consumption will have to take account of the conditions of production. Whatever other motives people bring to the process, there will still be the underlying reality, observed by Marx's in his comments on James Mill, that human needs will exist as a source of weakness that gives me power as a producer, just as the production of others can give them power over me in my role as consumer<sup>115</sup>.

If the revolutionary process that would be necessary to give rise to any kind of socialism was able to act as Marx hoped that it would, by teaching people that they could relate to others as members of a shared community and achieve what they had most reason to desire in common with them, it seems clear that market socialism can do nothing to sustain this process. Market socialism is, in fact, a continuation of the state of affairs that exists within capitalism in which 'society' is an abstract entity standing over the individual. At best, Arneson gives us the possibility of community between producers within a single firm rather than community between producers and consumers, or between producers in different parts of the production process. Indeed, given his assumptions about the probable necessity of hierarchy and the division of

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid. pp525

<sup>115</sup> Marx 'Excerpts from James Mill's *Elements of Political Economy*' (op cit) pp275-276

mental and physical labour under market socialism,<sup>116</sup> we might well join Michael Albert in doubting that even this limited community can be sustained, or therefore that is more likely that it will lead to the emergence of the kind of ‘coordinator class’, whose position, in the production process and relative monopoly of intellectual labour, will privilege them in their encounters with ordinary workers<sup>117</sup>.

This does not mean that all producers and consumers will constantly exploit one another or that, what Arneson is proposing, is as bad as contemporary capitalism, indeed the greater access to the means of production, that Arneson presupposes, could succeed in eliminating some of the worst unfairness that presently exists. However, the kind of concern for others that Marx suggested could be the result of producing as human beings has become a purely external standard that is imposed upon the market process, a process whose collective outcome might well be something that workers and consumers would actually wish to avoid. What we have is an account that divorces morality from desire in the way that people think about their involvement in the economic system in a manner that cannot sustain the younger MacIntyre’s vision of the role of morality within a socialist society.

An alternative suggestion is provided by advocates of forms of what Devine terms electronic socialism, such as Albert’s ‘participatory economics’. Albert objects, with some justification, that market socialism will not produce an economy that by its ‘intrinsic operations’ promotes such values as ‘solidarity, equity, diversity, and participatory self-management’. His alternative is the goal of ‘informed, collective self-management’, which is, however, something that he believes can only be fulfilled under certain conditions:

- Participatory workers must weigh the gains from working less or using less productive though more fulfilling techniques, against the consequent loss of

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<sup>116</sup> See Arneson ‘Meaningful Work and Market Socialism’ (op cit) p518.

<sup>117</sup> Michael Albert *Parecon: Life After Capitalism* (London, Verso 2003) p79

consumer well being. Likewise, participatory consumers must weigh the benefits of consumption requests against the sacrifices required to produce them.

- Participatory workers must distinguish an equitable workload from one that is too light or too heavy. Likewise, participatory consumers must distinguish reasonable consumption requests from ones that are excessively or overly modest.
- Everyone must know the true social costs and benefits of what they desire to consume or produce, including the quantifiable and non-quantifiable consequences of their choices.<sup>118</sup>

This seems to be a fair summary of what was missing from market socialism. Albert suggests that it can be achieved within a system of ‘decentralized participatory planning’ in which workers, both individually and within higher level workers’ councils, put forward suggestions about what they intend to produce that are then brought together by IT processing facilitation boards with the consumption proposals from consumers and their councils. Using data from previous years and taking into account such things as long term investment commitments, a set of prices are then released that will then form of the basis for further rounds of negotiations until a final plan is produced<sup>119</sup>. Within this framework, workplaces that were less productive than average, or consumers asking for a greater than average allocation of resources, would have an opportunity to plead their case to relevant higher councils but, in the absence of special circumstances, Albert concludes that they would feel obliged to conform to the same levels as others<sup>120</sup>.

The main problem with all this from the perspective of this discussion is identified by Devine when he observes that, whereas there is face to face interaction

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid. p123

<sup>119</sup> Ibid. pp127-134

<sup>120</sup> Ibid. pp131-132

within the different workers' and consumers' councils, there is none between them<sup>121</sup>. Interaction between workers and consumers is, in fact, facilitated through a form of virtual market, or 'neoclassical electronic socialism' as Devine terms it<sup>122</sup>. One problem with this approach is the existence of tacit knowledge that cannot be codified and included in such calculations<sup>123</sup>, but it also fails to acknowledge the role of people as citizens:

Despite a few scattered references to politics and citizens, people in 'Parecon' appear as either workers or consumers, but not as citizens. There are no political institutions or processes through which citizens discuss the values on which they want their society to be based, the universal rights and responsibilities of citizens, the choices of social priorities that have to be made.<sup>124</sup>

Devine accepts the relevance of market exchange for some economic transactions but stresses the crucial importance of *ex ante* co-ordination through negotiation for major interdependent investment<sup>125</sup>. In order to facilitate this, as well as the sharing of tacit knowledge, Devine argues that enterprises within this system, would be socially owned by those affected by their activities including:

the enterprise's workers, other enterprises in the same line of production, major suppliers and users (directly or through their trade or consumer associations), the localities and regions in which the enterprise is based, and single issue groups with an interest in, *e.g.*, the environmental or equal opportunities impact of the enterprise. These social owners would be represented on the Board of Directors of the enterprise, negotiate over

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<sup>121</sup> Devine 'Parecon: Life After Capitalism' (op cit) p210

<sup>122</sup> Ibid. p212

<sup>123</sup> Ibid. p214

<sup>124</sup> Ibid. p215

<sup>125</sup> Ibid. p210

strategic policy decisions and monitor the activities of the internally self-managed workforce.<sup>126</sup>

In short, what both market socialism and parecon lack and negotiated coordination promises, is an account of political interaction:

Unlike coordination through the coercion of either market forces or state direction, negotiated coordination requires people to engage consciously with their interdependence, with the consequences of their actions for others. It encourages people to transcend their sectional or partial interests and take account of the situation of others.<sup>127</sup>

If we are to go beyond the market and find some room for ex ante coordination of economic activity through negotiation between those involved, then the first thing we need to do is to accept that some degree of conflict and disagreement is inevitable and that socialist planning would, therefore, be an intensely political process for its management and resolution. If this process was to avoid becoming an exercise in the tyranny of the majority, we would, ideally, wish also to ensure that the same group of people do not always find themselves on the losing side. Once we have firmly rejected the idea that the USSR or other Stalinist regimes represented any kind of fulfilment of socialist aspiration, it becomes easier to see how socialism could demonstrate its superiority to capitalism in this respect. Thus, Alex Callinicos argues that the disappearance of antagonistic capitalist relations of production could play an essential role in achieving this and so achieving the kind of pluralist order that many post-war political scientists claimed to be a feature of Western liberal democracies but which, in reality, is undermined by the concentration of economic power within capitalism<sup>128</sup>.

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<sup>126</sup> Pat Devine 'Participatory Planning Through Negotiated Coordination' in *Science & Society*, Vol. 66, No. 1, (Spring 2002) p77

<sup>127</sup> Ibid. p74

<sup>128</sup> Alex Callinicos *The Revenge of History: Marxism and the East European Revolutions* (Cambridge, Polity 1991) p130

The necessity of such 'cross-cutting cleavages' is also stressed by Bellamy in his version of the Weberian politics of responsibility, 'democratic liberalism'<sup>129</sup>. Where the Marxist humanist vision, that I am advancing, parts company with Bellamy, is its appeal to moral norms and a notion of human well-being in the negotiations that must take place between different members of society. Bellamy follows Weber and Nietzsche in treating, what he terms, 'moralizing' as an expression of the 'will to power', rendering conflict part of the existential condition of human beings<sup>130</sup>. As we saw earlier, this represents an unconvincing revision of the way that we understand both the self and its process of evaluation, we can also add that the resolution of conflict, on such a basis, renders the judgments of each of the parties an exercise in pure pragmatism. For example, Bellamy suggests that such procedural norms as majority rule based on an equal vote 'are simply functional components of the political system necessary for the peaceful resolution of social conflict'<sup>131</sup>. But, if this is the case, what are we to make of forms of oppression that are, at least, as stable as the form of liberal society that Bellamy envisages? At the very least, such an approach could also be used to justify the exclusion from decision making of those who are too weak to threaten social stability in any serious way if their preferences are systematically overridden. Such a Weberian account might, therefore, acknowledge the need to reconcile differing perspectives but only as a means of achieving stability, it does not share the socialist aspiration of avoiding oppression.

The politics of a socialist society cannot be treated as a purely pragmatic process divorced from any moral commitment to equal participation, or the achievement of human well being, which, as we have now seen, is crucially tied up with forms of self-realisation. This doesn't mean that there are no problems of pluralism, or that a socialist society will not have to find ways for people to make trade-offs

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<sup>129</sup> Richard Bellamy 'Liberalism and the Challenge of Pluralism' in *Rethinking Liberalism* (London, Pinter 2000) p197

<sup>130</sup> Ibid. p253

<sup>131</sup> Ibid. p259

between the goods that they want to pursue. However, this does not have to lead us in the direction of market socialism. Moreover, if there are, indeed, strong reasons to defend self-realisation as a central component of a good life, it is not simply a blind leap of faith to argue that these reasons might be capable of shaping people's actions as they free themselves from the distortions of capitalism and begin to exert collective control over their social existence. Amidst all of the other claims that people may press in a socialist society, the necessity of upholding the conditions for self-realisation will have important implications for the demands that we should make as consumers, just as our claims as producers would have to be tempered by an appreciation of the importance of the claims of consumption that Marxists theorists sometimes seem to neglect. This opens the possibility for some kind of a moral underpinning to the resolution of conflicts over planning in a socialist society, whilst leaving a significant role for the compromises of democratic politics in its exact outcome.





# Conclusion

## What can we say about the moral resources of resistance?

If a revolutionary transformation of society is not on the immediate agenda, reformism seems to be the only available alternative. However, this conclusion, though commonplace, is a trap, since reformism is not primarily the search for reforms, but is best understood as a project that is shaped by its acceptance of the basic structures of capitalism and liberal democracy. This results in a failure to engage with problems that arise from the works of the fundamental workings of the capitalist order and which have become accentuated in the period of neo-liberalism, including environmental and social destruction and profound limitations on the workings of democracy.

In order not to remain trapped in the verbal prison constructed around reformism, in which the 'revolutionary' is confined to the role of a millenarian dreamer, we need to focus on the resources available to different forms of resistance to the capitalist order. These forms of resistance may, in particular times and places, be capable of contributing to a revolutionary overthrow of the existing order, however, in other less immediately propitious circumstances, they may still be capable of providing the resources for defending, or even expanding, the areas of life that provide resistance to the dominant structures. They may even be capable of producing reforms which, unlike those of reformism, embody a logic that in some way challenges this order, rather than accepting it.

Whatever accusations have been levelled at MacIntyre, by Perry Anderson et al (see section 5.1 above) after his abandonment of Marxism in the 1960s, he did not follow the well worn path to reformism, and most certainly, did not take the popular further step onwards to reaction, but still remains unreconciled with the capitalist order. He is still, therefore, a theorist who is concerned with how we can identify ways in which people can discover 'conceptions of a good and of virtues adequate to the moral needs of resistance'<sup>1</sup> and is, for this reason, worth studying. The question of MacIntyre's contribution to the search for such sources across the different stages of his work and, crucially, his relation to the Marxist tradition and its contribution to this enquiry, has been the guiding thread of this dissertation.

We have seen that Kelvin Knight has high hopes for the project that MacIntyre initiates with *After Virtue*, describing it as a form of 'revolutionary Aristotelianism', a project that, he hopes, could contribute 'legitimation and coordination' to resistance and so promote 'a new class war of attrition'<sup>2</sup>. The most obvious problem with this is that, as others have pointed out<sup>3</sup>, it is very odd to describe an account of resistance that absolutely rules out the possibility of overthrowing the existing order as 'revolutionary'. However, as we have now seen, the problem with MacIntyre's account of the moral resources of resistance goes much further than Knight's rhetorical exaggeration in coming up with a memorable label for MacIntyre's politics – 'radical Aristotelianism' would perhaps have been a more honest title. The real problem is that MacIntyre is not simply pessimistic about the prospects of fully fledged revolution, but that he seems to undermine the possibility for *any* serious wide scale form of resistance in contemporary societies, except in marginal forms of 'local' community.

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<sup>1</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken' in *The MacIntyre Reader* edited by Kelvin Knight (Cambridge, Polity Press 1998) p232

<sup>2</sup> Kelvin Knight 'Revolutionary Aristotelianism' in *Contemporary Political Studies 1996 Volume 2* edited by Iain Hampshire-Monk and Jeffrey Stanyer (The Political Studies Association of the United Kingdom 1996) p896

<sup>3</sup> See 'Introduction' to in *Virtue and Politics: Alasdair MacIntyre's Revolutionary Aristotelianism* edited by Paul Blackledge and Kelvin Knight (Notre Dame Indiana, University of Notre Dame Press 2011) p2

As we have now seen, this is a pessimism that arises in part from MacIntyre's sociological account of the effects of proletarianisation. Thus, in 1.6, we saw how MacIntyre's initial pessimism about the possibilities for working class resistance were formulated in the 1960s and are of a piece with contemporary concerns around diminishing working class consciousness in an era of efficiently managed capitalism and rising working class affluence. Although he does not explicitly say so at the time, such a line of thought would seem to give us the conclusion that resistance (perhaps even revolutionary movements) may have been possible in an earlier period of industrial capitalism, but that the moment for this has now passed. Stated this baldly, of course, such fears of the disastrous effects of consumerism, managed capitalism, or the welfare state, do not sit at all well with the significant evidence that we have of significant working class resistance in advanced capitalist societies such as Britain and France throughout the 60s, 70s and 80s.

The problem is that, as we saw in 3.2, rather than engage with a reality that turned out to be more contradictory than some on the original New Left had at first feared, MacIntyre's next major statements on working class consciousness, in the mid 1990s, suggest an even bleaker picture, in which it is not simply developments in post-war welfare state capitalism, and still less any issues that might reasonably have been raised by what, at the time would have been nearly two decades of neo-liberal reaction, but rather it is proletarianisation itself that is supposed to have necessarily undermined the virtues necessary for resistance<sup>4</sup>. In defence of this position, MacIntyre has claimed that, since its emergence, the working class has shown itself to be 'either reformist or unpolitical except in the most exceptional of situations'<sup>5</sup>. However, such a statement does nothing convincingly to smooth over the enormous neglect of the historical record that MacIntyre's later more extreme position involves. Leaving aside the crucial historical importance of the revolutionary episodes that MacIntyre brushes off as 'exceptional' (they were but that's hardly the point), what we

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<sup>4</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'The *Theses on Feuerbach*: A Road Not Taken' (op cit) p232

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Marxism and Christianity* (London, Duckworth 1995) p39

see is an analysis imprisoned in the same verbal prison that I mentioned above, one in which anything short of the immediate overthrow of capitalism has to be reduced to reformism. Again, as I suggested in 3.2, resistance outside of revolutionary situations can take many forms without being purely reformist or unpolitical. To argue otherwise is to neglect the implied values of collective solidarity embodied in the labour movement and a great many communities that have existed and, indeed, grown up *within*, and not simply at the margins of, capitalist societies.

However, what we must also acknowledge is that, even if both the particular conditions of post-war welfare state capitalism, or more generally, the whole phenomenon of proletarianisation are patently compatible with sustaining the moral resources of resistance, we must ask serious questions about the destructive effects of neo-liberalism. In section 3.2 I also, briefly, surveyed some of the problems posed by capitalism's direction since the mid to late 1970s. The increasing 'precariousness' of work, the use of new technologies to aid management control, a renewed ideological offensive of possessive individualism and the scapegoating of minorities and welfare claimants, along with historic defeats for the labour movement, are not to be taken lightly. I cannot claim to have constructed an adequate account here of what these developments might mean for developing an account of the moral resources of resistance that can advance beyond MacIntyre's moral wilderness. What I would suggest is that the process of proletarianisation in earlier stages of capitalist development, could be just as disorientating and destructive of communities and yet, *pace* MacIntyre, it did not preclude the development of new forms of solidarity and resistance. However, to caution against undue pessimism is not the same thing as providing a more convincing response. This remains work that is unfinished and is, indeed, one of the areas of further development with which any fuller response to MacIntyre's work must engage.

What I believe will certainly emerge from any such enquiry will be a picture that has much in common with forms of class consciousness in earlier stages of capitalist development, namely that consciousness will be fragmented and often contradictory, a situation in which the moral resources of resistance exist alongside 'Stone Age' elements and different elements of capitalist ideas. In such a situation it is necessary to provide a coherent viewpoint, one that, to refer to Antonio Gramsci, renovates and makes critical an already existing activity<sup>6</sup>. This is an activity that could, if one wished, plausibly be seen as the development of a *tradition* of enquiry. However, such an understanding of tradition differs crucially from the account that MacIntyre develops in such places as *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* and *Three Rival Versions of Moral Enquiry* in that it takes the position of the majority who live, as MacIntyre would put it, 'betwixt and between' as its natural starting point, rather than viewing their situation as placing them outside of the possibility of coherent rational enquiry.

Along with his sociology, therefore, it is MacIntyre's account of traditions of rational enquiry as self-contained conceptual schemes, schemes that develop purely according to their own internal rationality, which also leads him to draw such pessimistic conclusions about the possibilities for meaningful resistance. However, the argument that I developed in chapter 4 is that we can confidently reject this aspect of MacIntyre's thought in the light of his failure to demonstrate our supposed inability to translate, or most crucially, to interpret the claims of different schemes. This does not mean that there is no truth to the idea that there can be a historical development of reason and desire, what it does allow us to recognise is that such a development does not spin frictionlessly according to the internal dynamic of the set of ideas developed within each 'tradition'. This is a point that he seems to neglect completely, at least in his major works of the 1980s. He is, therefore, unable to acknowledge at this stage the need to come to terms with the constraints imposed by our human nature, that is the manner in which we are 'cusped' between nature and culture to return to Terry

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<sup>6</sup> Antonio Gramsci *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935* edited by David Forgacs (New York, New York University Press 2000) p332

Eagleton's useful formulation<sup>7</sup>. It is, of course, a point that he seems to have taken on in his discussion of 'animality, disability and vulnerability' in *Dependent Rational Animals*<sup>8</sup>, however, the true scale of the revision to the structure of this major work that this would represent is nowhere acknowledged.

Another point of contact between the thought of human beings and any kind of external reality is the relationship between our ideas and the social structures inhabited by the agents who express them. As we saw above, in 2.7, MacIntyre, around the time of *After Virtue*, sees himself as offering an integrated account of the relationship between the ideas of human beings and their broader social relationships. However, this is hardly borne out by his own account of the extraordinary causal role which he gives to disputes in philosophy in guiding historical change (sections 2.5 and 2.6), a case that is not strengthened by his rather vague invocation of Karl Polanyi as a replacement for Marxist historical materialism (2.7). In the light of chapters 3 and 4, we can now see an important reason for this, namely that his acceptance of the notion of a tradition understood as a self-enclosed conceptual scheme will incline him to an idealist account. Because of its commitment to the idea that a scheme of thought develops purely according to its own rationality, such a perspective cannot properly attempt, what Ellen Meiksins Wood describes as, a 'social history of political theory', or indeed of theory *tout court*, in which the development of ideas is understood as taking place in a particular historical context, even if they cannot simply be 'read off' from people's social position or class<sup>9</sup>.

To mention Wood's 'social history of political theory' is, of course, to bring us back to historical materialism and to Marxism, the tradition of thought in which the

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<sup>7</sup> Terry Eagleton 'Self-Realization, Ethics and Socialism' in *New Left Review* 1 / 237 September–October 1999 p153.

<sup>8</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Carus, Peru Illinois 1999) pp.xxi-xii

<sup>9</sup> Ellen Meiksins Wood *Citizens to Lords: A Social History of Western Political Thought from Antiquity to the Middle Ages* (London, Verso 2008) pp11-12

younger MacIntyre, during the late 1950s, originally hoped to find the moral resources of resistance. We have seen that, by the time of his 1970 study of Herbert Marcuse, MacIntyre was arguing that 'by the present time to be faithful to Marxism we have to cease to be Marxists; and whoever now remains a Marxist has thereby discarded Marxism'<sup>10</sup>. This is a position that he justifies in the light of Marxism's supposed failure to rise above the perspective of bourgeois society with its assumption of the separation of the economic and the political / superstructural<sup>11</sup>. However, this is a position that not only ignores the distinction between the theoretical concepts of historical materialism and a particular social formation's institutional organisation<sup>12</sup>, but also ignores the subtlety of MacIntyre's own earlier Marxist attempt to offer a non-reductive account of the relation between base and superstructure, an account in which the economic base provides a set of relations around which the human relations can entwine themselves, 'a kernel of human relationships from which all else grows'<sup>13</sup>. If we are to begin to get a handle on the complexities of the part subject / part object nature of human beings, I believe that it is here that we should start.

What I have attempted to argue in this dissertation is that the resources offered by Marxist theorising, by the Marxist tradition, if you will, remain relevant for our current thinking about the problems of resistance. *After Virtue* ends with MacIntyre suggesting that a Marxist 'who took Trotsky's last writings with great seriousness would be forced into a pessimism quite alien to the Marxist tradition and in becoming a pessimist he would in an important way have ceased to be a Marxist'<sup>14</sup>. Here, however, it is not some alleged flaw in Marxist approaches to base and superstructure, but rather the failure of Marxism as a political project, that is supposed to lead away

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<sup>10</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *Marcuse* (London, Fontana 1970) p61

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. See also Alasdair MacIntyre 'Three Perspectives on Marxism: 1953, 1968, 1995' in *Ethics and Politics: Selected Essays, Volume 2* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2006) p152

<sup>12</sup> Alex Callinicos *Making History: Agency, Structure and Change in Social Theory* (Leiden, Brill 2004) p200

<sup>13</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' in *Alasdair MacIntyre's Engagement with Marxism: : Essays and Articles, 1953–1974* edited by Blackledge and Davidson (Leiden, Brill 2008) pp54-55

<sup>14</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) p262



from the Marxist tradition. However, this point only works if we accept that the reality of the Soviet Union proves that 'the theory which was to have illuminated the path to human liberation had in fact led into darkness'<sup>15</sup>, a point that need not follow if we reject the idea that the Soviet Union represented any kind of socialist achievement. Thus, I hope to have established, in chapter 1, that MacIntyre's commitment to socialism as a form of self-emancipation provides a powerful response to Isaiah Berlin's critique of Marxism as an elitist attempt to force the people to be free. If MacIntyre's own involvement with the authoritarian Socialist Labour League at the time of his most interesting Marxist writings (let's say from 1958 to 1960) seems to contradict this, what it contradicts is exactly his own and Marx's commitment to working class self-emancipation, or put another way, to the 'self-conscious, independent movement of the immense majority, in the interests of the immense majority'<sup>16</sup>. The argument that such an option must be rejected, out of hand, is more a reflection of MacIntyre's own pessimism, which, as we have seen, is sustained by his assumptions about the nature of tradition as conceptual schemes and his extremely pessimistic sociology. However, there is nothing I have done here that shows how such a politics should actually be conducted, and this question, alongside a further sociological examination of the causes for optimism and pessimism, remains another aspect of unfinished business with which a fuller elaboration of this project would require.

Following the lead given by MacIntyre in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', I have suggested that the starting point for Marxism, that is, Marxism as viewed as a contribution to an understanding of the specifically moral resources of resistance, is to begin with the idea of morality as the means to the satisfaction of our most important desires. Demonstrating that such concerns can be advanced within a specifically Marxist framework was, of course, my goal in chapter 5, where I argued that a consistent anti-humanism, such as that developed by Louis Althusser, is not only

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Marx *The Communist Manifesto* in in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings* edited by David McLellan (Oxford, Oxford University Press 1977) p230

deeply mistaken in itself, but also incompatible with Marx's crucial insight in his third thesis on Feuerbach. Anti-humanists cannot avoid understanding their own actions in terms of reasons and values and so must exempt themselves from the analysis, one that is based solely in terms of objects and structures, that they wish to foist onto others (see 5.5). Thus, I have argued that if there has been some kind of moral deficit in Marxist theorising, it must be rejected on specifically Marxist grounds.

As MacIntyre puts it in 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness', in contrast to those who claim that we choose our moral values, the Marxist discovers morality through an understanding which 'rediscovers fundamental human desire'<sup>17</sup>. We saw, in chapter 2, how MacIntyre continued his critique of morality as an expression of will or preference, even as he abandoned the Marxist framework in which it was originally developed. In line with my emphasis on the contradictory nature of consciousness, I have my reservations about the extent to which it would be right to see emotivism embodied in our everyday practice, even in the practice of a self-professed emotivist like A. J. Ayer. However, I have attempted to support and expand upon MacIntyre's all too brief attempts to carry his critique of emotivism over to other theories of non-cognitivism. Thus, in section 2.3, I argued that MacIntyre's central point about the failure of such theories to distinguish moral discourse from other forms of persuasion does also apply to recent and more sophisticated non-cognitivist accounts such as those of Simon Blackburn and Allan Gibbard. What I have not done, and what, therefore, remains an area for future study, is to subject MacIntyre's brief discussion of the cognitivism of Alan Gewirth to similar scrutiny<sup>18</sup>.

My main positive suggestion for the development of socialist theorising is given in chapter 6 in response to the problem that reasonable pluralism about the good poses for any account based on treating morality as the satisfaction of desire. For all of his failings in his discussion of Marxism, I have argued that Isaiah Berlin was right to

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<sup>17</sup> MacIntyre 'Notes from the Moral Wilderness' (op cit) p66

<sup>18</sup> See MacIntyre *After Virtue* (op cit) pp66-67

draw our attention to the possibility of forms of tragic conflict between incompatible goods. However, although this represents a possible source of intra-personal conflict, and with it the possibility of tragedy and failure, I have argued that there is no direct route from intra-personal to fully fledged inter-personal conflict. In defence of this position, I have attempted to show that Marxist understandings of the good based around self-realisation through creative activity, point to a crucial aspect of our well being and are compatible with a wide degree of diversity in the relative values placed upon other goods. On this basis, we can begin to construct institutions of negotiated co-ordination that seek out ways in which individuals may put forward their claims as producers and consumers and realise Marx's vision in his *'Excerpts from James Mill's Elements of Political Economy'* (see 6.4). However, I have done very little to give a full account of the different forms of communication by which producers and consumers could interact with each other as human beings. One aspect of this would be to look at how moral discourse, such as the discourse of distributive justice might figure in such communication. In particular, in the light of MacIntyre's own comments on the exclusion of the Aristotelian or Christian commitment to desert from much contemporary theorising, there is an interesting enquiry to be had about the role of desert in the claims that we can make of others<sup>19</sup>.

The kind of socialist project that I have developed is, therefore, anti-utopian in the sense that it accepts the continuing reality of conflict and tragedy and in the way in which harmony is to be achieved in part through political negotiation rather than springing up ready made. However, it is as well to say, before I finish, that I am not claiming that the kind of account that I have given in chapter 6 would be complete in itself, even if it was to be augmented with a more developed account of its moral discourse and institutional embodiment. For one thing, I do not wish to deny the importance of what we might broadly term existentialist understandings of the role of alienation in the human condition. Thus, in his fascinating survey of the subject,

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<sup>19</sup> See Alasdair MacIntyre *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Duckworth, London 1985) pp249-252

Richard Schmitt suggests that it is the duality of our nature that is the precondition for alienation, a situation in which, on the one hand, 'human lives are animal lives , embodied, ruled by natural necessity and blind accident', and, on the other hand, 'we are thinking beings'<sup>20</sup>. Drawing on the Heideggerian notion of the 'thrown' (*geworfen*) nature of our existence<sup>21</sup>, Schmitt suggests that the human condition of being an embodied mind means that we are, 'caught in a world not of our own choosing'<sup>22</sup>. As he puts it:

Many events in life make no sense whatsoever. The death of a beloved child, wars, famines, floods, and conflagrations cause great pain but cannot be explained or justified. The alienated accept such events as paradigmatic of all of life; they expect no sense, no continuity. Life for them is not going anywhere; there exists neither purposes nor projects.<sup>23</sup>

Schmitt acknowledges that Marx's contribution, compared to the thought of, for example, Søren Kierkegaard, is to extend the debate on alienation from focusing simply on the tension between purposiveness and determination by accidents and to consider the ways in which the structures of social relationships can constitute a key part of the burden of external factors<sup>24</sup>. One can recall, in this context, the wonderful passage from E. P. Thompson, quoted above in 5.2, in which communism is depicted as a society in which 'things are thrown from the saddle and cease to ride mankind' and human beings cease to live 'in a defensive posture, warding off the assault of "circumstances"'<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Richard Schmitt *Alienation and Freedom* (Boulder, Westview Press 2003) p76

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. pp48-49

<sup>22</sup> Ibid. p50

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p58

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. p30

<sup>25</sup> E. P. Thompson 'An Open Letter to Leszek Kolakowski' in *The Poverty of Theory & Other Essays* (London, Merlin 1978) p363

But, if this represents the overcoming of a key structural element in alienation, it could, of course, be objected that other possibilities, such as bereavement or illness, remain that could undermine the sense and continuity of our lives, just as we might still be tempted to avoid facing the difficult and painful nature of existence by living our lives on the surface in the manner of bad faith<sup>26</sup>. This is true and, I think, helps to underline the point made by Cohen, that socialism does not entail at the end of tragedy and misery, or we might add, broader forms of human failure<sup>27</sup>. However, the socialist account of self-realisation and fulfilment on which I have focused in the rest of this chapter is relevant even here in our understanding of the broader aspects of alienation. We saw above, that for Schmitt it is distinctive of the alienated that they see the meaninglessness that pervades some events as 'paradigmatic of all of life'. A more all pervading form of alienation is not, therefore, an autonomic conclusion to misfortune, indeed, Schmitt stresses that broader forms of alienation flourish amongst agents who lack self-esteem and recognition from others<sup>28</sup>. These, of course, are the very elements whose importance I have been stressing in the forgoing discussion of the nature of socialism humanism. I conclude, therefore, that a Marxist account of alienation is not undermined by a broader understanding of alienation and can have much to contribute to this broader debate. However, it is an ongoing debate, and one that I have not addressed here. What I can say, at this point, is that it is right to say that any attempt to portray Marxism as a complete and finished project of human self-mastery, one that no longer has to engage with the messy and tragic nature of our embodiment, is a mistake.

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<sup>26</sup> Schmitt stresses that attempting to evade the ambiguities of the human condition is just as much a mode of alienation as being more straightforwardly and obviously defeated by them, 'One flees into religious orthodoxy or diversions, into rigid optimism, into ambition, competition, violence, into unbending fixation on the small and insignificant details of life in order to overlook and pass by everything that is ambiguous, requires interpretation, cannot be well understood, let alone managed or changed, and leaves one perplexed and anxious'. Schmitt *Alienation and Freedom* (op cit) p51

<sup>27</sup> G. A. Cohen 'Isaiah's Marx and Mine' in *Isaiah Berlin: A Celebration* edited by Avishai Margalit (University of Chicago Press, 2001) pp122-123

<sup>28</sup> Schmitt *Alienation and Freedom* (op cit) pp66-74

One final challenge that I have not faced in the forgoing discussion is Cohen's diagnosis of one-sidedness in Marx's account of human beings, a flaw that he identifies as an overemphasis on the creative side of human nature, which neglects the subject's relationship to itself that had such an exaggerated presence in Hegel's work<sup>29</sup>. It is this need for a sense of who I am that, he believes, has traditionally been answered by 'a shared culture based on nationality, or race, or religion, or some slice or amalgam thereof'. Cohen accepts that Marx did not deny that there exists a need for self-definition, but Cohen also argues that the creative activity that is Marx's focus, need not provide a source of self and is a good 'in large part independently of any self-understanding it may afford'<sup>30</sup>. This is, certainly, a more interesting explanation of the focus of Marx's earlier humanistic works than Collier or Kymlicka gives us. However, we have now seen that the emphasis on self-realisation and externalisation is not only defensible, but is defensible precisely in terms of the subject's understanding of itself. Moreover, it is through work that we form social bonds and, once freed from capitalist structures, relate to those who use what we produce. It may be that this is still not enough and that there is a need for membership of a shared community beyond these bonds and relationships. However, unless the claim is that destructive forms of nationalism are an inevitable part of human nature, something that Cohen himself denies<sup>31</sup>, there is no reason to believe that a recognition of this dimension would lead to forms of conflict that would undermine the overall account of a socialist society that I wish to endorse. This too can, I hope, safely be left for discussion another day.

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<sup>29</sup> G. A. Cohen 'Reconsidering Historical Materialism' in *Karl Marx's Theory of History: A Defence* (Oxford, Oxford University Press 2000) pp346-347

<sup>30</sup> Ibid. p347

<sup>31</sup> Ibid. p349

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